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JENNIFER'S
HOUSE

*CHRISTINE
NOBLE GOVAN*

*JENNIFER'S
HOUSE*



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*All the characters in this novel are
fictitious. Any apparent likeness to
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Johnny' found in 'The American Song-
bag' compiled by Carl Sandburg*

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*To my very dear aunt
Gertrude Isabel Quintard Zabriskie
who never for one moment
of her good and busy life
was remotely like the Isabel
in this book*

PART

I

JENNIFER



CHAPTER ONE

JONAH lay in the hammock on the porch of his grandfather's house and stared at Lutie through his lashes. Lutie was six, going on seven. She sat in a white porch rocker, her bare feet straight out before her, and sang to an eyeless china-headed doll which she held in her arms.

'Go to sleepy, liddle baby,
Les' de boogie man git you.
When you wake I'll give you a cake
And let you ride a liddle pon-ee.'

Jonah, giving the hammock a push with his good leg, let the words of the old lullaby run through his mind. The tune was like water, soothing, pleasantly repetitious:

'Some are black and some are blue,
Some are the colour of Daddy's ol' shoe.
Go to sleepy, liddle bay-bee!'

'Hesh yo' mouf', chile, an' go ter sleep,' said Lutie suddenly, in exactly the tone and enunciation the Negroes used to their own children. 'Hesh, I say!' She slapped the doll gently and rocked very hard. A moment later she stopped and kissed its china cheek, murmuring, 'Po' li'l thang. Po', po' thang! Mammy loves it, yes, she do!' Over and over—a bee-like drone that was one with the lovely, murmurous sounds of summer.

It was comfortable here, lying in the hammock, drenched in the

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soft green light which poured through the mimosas and over the walls and columns of the white brick house. From the servants' quarters in the back came, softened by distance, sounds of that busyness which contributed to the family's constant comfort. Someone was holding an axe against the huge grindstone. The back screen door was thrown open and Delia—Jonah knew it was Delia because she was the dining-room servant—flapped a tablecloth in the sun so that a sudden start of brightness, like a bird's passing, flashed across the soft green of the porch and was, in an instant, gone again. The chickens which had been singing and clucking at the rear of the house came running at the sight of crumbs, and Jonah heard, with a lovely sense of the rightness of things, a hen's mothering call to her chicks.

The old pointer, sleeping at the foot of the porch columns, was first to know that someone was coming. He heard them long before the wheels of the buggy rattled over the stock gap at the foot of the drive. He rose stiffly and stood staring with red-rimmed eyes until, two hundred feet away, the buggy turned slowly between the stone pillars which formed the gateway.

Jonah, hearing the preliminary rumble with which the old dog always preceded a bark, sat up in the hammock and stretched his neck to see down the curved drive.

He remembered with sharp annoyance that this was the day on which the companion for his now invalided grandmother was to arrive. The woman was the daughter of one of his grandfather's close friends, and in his mind Jonah had created her so vividly and with such detail that he could dislike her thoroughly.

If she were a nurse, she would be bustling and secretive. Nurses were an anathema at Riveridge. When babies were born or old folks died, there were dozens of loving black hands which could perform the necessary rites. The Negroes resented the hoity-toity ways of white help, and Jonah's mistrust of them had been fed from his babyhood. This one, he had thought, was probably hard-featured, and certainly officious. Worst of all, she was a stranger and would inject into the lifelong peace and isolation of

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Riverridge the distraction of a new and probably unpleasant personality.

On the lawn the whistling of the turkeys broke into an hysterical gobbling at the dog's hoarse bark. The softer sounds of the home place were lost in the raucous noise they made and in the sound of the hooves and wheels on gravel. Jonah rose and limped towards the door with every intention of escaping the intruders as long as possible. With his hand on the knob he cast a sullen glance at them and stopped to stare.

His grandfather was driving. Under the wide brim of the panama hat, Jonah saw, in the lean brown face, the white flash of still perfect teeth and the long wrinkles which had been there since boyhood on either side of a sharp triangle of nose. John Tremont was leaning towards a girl in the buggy and every line of his figure—so singularly lithe in a man of sixty-five—showed that he was enjoying himself. As the buggy approached, Jonah stood transfixed and watched his grandfather push the hat back from his forehead and point with the whip to the broad acres of bluegrass, the river, and the wooded bluff which gave the place its name. He could almost hear the deep satisfaction with which Tremont invariably said to new arrivals, 'Well—this is Riverridge!'

The girl looked up at the house and Jonah's breath went out between his teeth in a little explosion of surprise.

She wore a saucy straw hat tilted over her eyes and a cream-coloured suit. A shirtwaist with a high lacy collar which fitted under a demure chin lent her an absurdly grown-up air. As the buggy came to a stop at the foot of the steps, John Tremont leaped out and took off his hat. The silver of his hair gleamed a moment in the sun, then he stepped into the shadow of the house as the girl, rising, put one small hand in his and jumped from the buggy. She laughed as she touched the ground, and, laughing, looked up at Jonah, dark and staring, on the house porch.

'Come alive, boy!' cried his grandfather. 'Mind your manners! Come and speak to Miss Page!'

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Afterwards Jonah could not remember going down the steps, dragging his lame leg beside him. He could not even remember Fountain coming out, buttoning on his white jacket, grinning like a coal-black 'possum, to get the bags, or the crazy rocking of the chair as shy Lutie fled. He only remembered the tiny halo of a pompadour against the under side of the newcomer's hat, and how the green light washed over her, and shone up from the white paint of the steps into her face, making it strangely pale except for two black, moth-like brows, and soft, very red lips.

Suddenly, like one waking, he realized that the old pointer was making an unholy din with his hoarse baying, and that the turkeys on the lawn were still in a frenzy. Through the noise he mumbled some word of greeting and was conscious that her hand felt warm in his cold one.

His grandfather, wiping his forehead with one of the enormous white linen handkerchiefs that his wife made especially for him said, 'Yes, Isabel, this is Riverridge, and this is Jonah Tremont—seventeen and a bookworm.'

Jonah flushed and for the first time in his life wished himself away from his grandfather. He let Isabel's hand fall and put his own to his cheek as if to assure himself that he would some day have a beard there. As his fingers touched the soft down on his jaw, his grandfather laughed, but the girl said, 'Jonah!' as if in surprise at the quaint name, and looked at him with more curiosity than amusement.

Her voice was flat and disappointing. Jonah, who was sensitive to sounds, disliked it. Coming from one so cool and ravishing it was doubly disagreeable to him. He turned about awkwardly and, muttering, 'How do you do?' stumbled up the steps.

On the porch he held the door for them and for Fountain, who had his arms full of the girl's luggage. His grandfather shouted over their heads, 'Jenny! We're here!' and from the rear of the house came the soft voice of his grandmother's maid, Sibby, 'Yassuh, Mistuh John, we's comin'!'

They stood for a few moments in the wide hall and Isabel

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looked about her at the worn loveliness of the place. The sunlight fell through the soft rose-coloured glass of the door's frame and lighted her face with a new beauty. Jonah felt his heart twist at the sight of her. She was incredibly lovely. If only she would never speak, he thought, she would be an angel.

Down the hall ran a broad strip of carpet, once brilliant and now faded to the rich softness of old gold with an indistinct border of roses and vines. The pieces of walnut and dark mahogany furniture, the huge portraits which would have looked too massive in a smaller place, suited it perfectly. Halfway down the hall white Corinthian columns marked where, to the left, the stair rose wide and beautiful and an entrance led to the dining-room. On the right three doorways opened into the big parlour and the library, where the light fell softly between slanted white window-blinds.

A walnut console table with a marble top stood against either wall in the rear of the hall. One of these, as Isabel was to know later, was for whiskey glasses and decanters which it was Fount's duty to keep constantly fresh and in order. On the other a huge silver bowl was always, as if by some fairy-tale magic, filled with fresh fruit. It was an old family habit to pause at one of these tables on the way up to bed for a nightcap or refreshment.

In a room at the end of the hall the door opened. The three had a glimpse of white ruffled curtains, an immense bed, and walls almost covered with small pictures. Then Sibby closed the door and bent with unconscious solicitude over the wheel chair which she pushed towards them.

Jonah, looking at the gaunt figure in that chair, felt a wave of pity go over him at the contrast between his grandmother and the girl who stood before her. It was a strange scene which he was to recall years later and to try to describe in the one of his novels which held in it the most of himself.

Jennifer Evans had been twenty-nine when young John Tremont, twenty-four and irresistibly handsome, had met her in England. She had fallen desperately and irrevocably in love with

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him and, because she was a woman who had never known defeat, he married her at the end of a six months' courtship, convinced that he had carried her off by storm.

Her money had restored war-scarred Riverridge, and her determined youthfulness and natural gregariousness made the place a centre of social activity. She had been a handsome woman, taller than her husband, with high colour and brown flashing eyes. Her long jet-black hair had been the talk of three counties and her greatest delight in her new home was the number of servants whom she could command to comb it. Her one physical defect was that topping that statuesque body were a head and features so small that not even the masses of cloudy hair could make them look in proportion.

She was an old woman now, who once had ridden from one end of the mighty estate to another all day and danced half the night; who had whipped one of her own maids for theft, and borne eight children and buried seven—old and terribly drawn with the deformity of arthritis. Her hands, which had known the exhilarating pull of reins, and had held new-born sons with incredible tenderness, were enlarged and misshapen. She could not walk, and yet, the most active of women once, Jonah had never heard her complain of the confinement she now endured.

Her hair was grey, an iron-grey, as if it turned reluctantly. The colour was gone from all but the dark eyes, so alert and penetrating. She was seventy years old and almost bedridden, but the fire and the vigour that had made her life rich and colourful burned from between the papery lids.

As the wheel chair approached them, she held out her gnarled hands, and Jonah wondered what it felt like to Isabel to take them between her own smooth palms. If she felt pity or repugnance she made no sign. She smiled and bent above the chair and said in her flat voice, 'Hello, Mrs. Tremont.'

Jennifer Tremont held the girl's hands in her own and turned to frown at her husband, lounging against the wall.

'Why, she's just a child!' she exclaimed. 'This child can't take

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care of me! I need a mature woman. You shouldn't have let her come!

Something faintly like annoyance—perhaps it was embarrassment at his wife's outspokenness—crossed John Tremont's face. Then he said, 'Nonsense! The place is overrun with mature women who can rub your back and lift you wherever you want to be put. Isabel can read to you and she can help Lucy's babies learn their letters. She'll make you young again!' and he came forward, stooping to kiss her carelessly.

She looked after him for a moment with a curious expression of exasperation and worship on her wrinkled face, and then turned to the girl again.

'You must be tired,' she said kindly. 'Push me into the parlour, Jonah; and, Sibby, you take Miss Isabel to her room. Show her where to put her things and then come back. I've told Fountain to bring us some tea,' she added, to Isabel. 'Come down as soon as you are freshened up a bit and we can really get acquainted.'

The girl turned and followed the coloured woman obediently. If she resented being told that she needed to 'freshen up,' she did not show it by the flutter of a lash. Jonah smiled to himself as he pushed his grandmother's chair into the dim parlour, wondering if the words had been consciously malicious because she felt keenly the contrast between herself and this young woman, or whether they had merely been tactless.

Wheeling his grandmother to a place of dignity beside the hearth, Jonah pulled forward the little table on which she invariably served tea each afternoon. It was the one English custom to which she had clung. In everything else she had become as truly Southern as the most unreconstructed rebel, and strangers were always amazed if they found out—not that she ever told it—that she was not born south of the Mason and Dixon line.

'Just a child,' she muttered. She plucked at her skirts with her twisted hands. 'What is John thinking of!'

Jonah made no answer. Any attempt to explain his grandfather

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to her would only give her material with which to work herself into a frenzy of indignation, he knew from experience. It was best to let her small frettings die unnoticed. He was spared having to say anything by Fountain's arrival with the tea-tray and his grandmother's absorption in its arrangement.

Before Fountain had left the room, Isabel, looking younger than ever with her hat off, came down into the hall. At the door of the parlour she gazed about her with amazement, and with that childlike expression of utter frankness which had so enchanted Jonah in his first sight of her. He almost expected her to say, 'Gee whiz!' so naïvely delighted was she with the room's mellow richness.

It was crowded with the same sort of massive furniture which stood in the hall. Oil portraits and paintings hung on the walls. The windows stretched from ceiling to floor. White indoor shutters gave the room a shadowy coolness that was most comfortable in summer. Among the books and ornaments on the table, between the marble busts on the mantels and shelves, were vases of great yellow roses whose sweetness filled the room with a melancholy fragrance. Polished brass andirons and a pierced brass screen stood before the enormous white marble mantelpiece on which a gilt and marble clock and candelabra dripped cut-glass pendants and were repeated in the big mirror behind them. Over the roses the paler reflection of Isabel swam in the old dark glass.

'Come in, child,' said Jennifer Tremont. 'Hot tea will rest you. Will you have cream or—lemon?'

There was a faint pause before the last word as though even yet she was reluctant to suggest that anyone should be so uncivilized as to put lemon in a cup of good tea.

'Cream, please,' said Isabel demurely, and sat in a chair facing the older woman. Jonah, looking quickly at his grandmother, saw her mouth settle into little lines of pleasure. He smiled, knowing that Isabel had unconsciously scored a point in her favour.

There was the faint clatter of tea-things, the murmur of 'Two

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lumps, or three?' and the soft hiss of a vine near the windows being sucked in by a brief zephyr. On the lawn an old turkey gobbled suddenly and as suddenly was still.

Tea having been satisfactorily dispensed, Mrs. Tremont leaned back, stirring her own cup carefully, and looked hard at the girl whose face, bent above the fragile cup and saucer, was pale and smooth—untouched by any embarrassment at her lack of fitness as a companion and nurse.

'Tell me about yourself,' said Jennifer suddenly. 'How old are you, really?'

Isabel raised her eyes. They were long and blue—odd eyes to be under the thick black brows.

'I'm seventeen—at least I shall be in September.'

'Sixteen.' The old woman shook her head. 'And who sent you away down here, child, to nurse a crabbed old woman?'

'Well——' Her eyes clouded in puzzlement as if trying to remember. She sipped a spoonful of the tea and swallowed it slowly before she answered.

'I wasn't sent, exactly. My father died and Mr. Tremont wrote to Mother.' She stopped again as if uncertain as to how to go on, and then she set her cup down on the small table and clasped her hands. Jonah, watching her from his corner of the sofa, saw her look appealingly at Jennifer, who apparently was absorbed in the effort of delicately dipping a sugar cookie into her tea.

'You see, Mrs. Tremont, my father was years and years older than my mother. He was an old man when I was born.'

'He was Mr. Tremont's age,' said Jennifer dryly.

'Yes. Well—I don't think she really ever loved him. Not after I grew up, anyway. He was good to her and all that—but, well—she was too young for him.'

Something sharp came into his grandmother's eyes. She made a sudden awkward movement with her great hands and then was quiet, like a bird settling upon its nest. Jonah, accustomed to her slightest change of expression, knew that she had had a swift remembrance of her own marriage and had had a fleeting, half-

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bitter, half-triumphant impulse to say something, thought better of it and remained silent.

'She wanted to marry someone else,' went on Isabel, in the deliberate, colourless voice to which Jonah was already becoming accustomed. She was oblivious to the slight intake of breath with which Mrs. Tremont greeted this intimation of mental adultery. 'So after he died—she—she was getting ready to and she, well—the man didn't like me. He didn't want a great overgrown girl about, he said. Mr. Tremont had offered to do anything he could. He told us about your illness. Mamma suggested that I write him that I would come and be a companion to you. I wouldn't want any pay,' she added with pathetic hastiness. 'And I guess he didn't realize how young I was—since he was my father's age. I—I almost had to come,' she said with something like panic in her eyes. Her voice dropped. 'I had no other place to go.'

'Of course you should have come,' said Jennifer heartily, but she did not add, as Jonah knew she would have liked to, 'No girl should be forced to stay with such an unnatural mother!'

She hated emotion. If she could put your leg in a splint or a mustard plaster to your chest, if she could herself concoct custards and broths and evil doses and stand over you while you swallowed them, if she could write a cheque and relieve your mental stomach-ache, she was in her element. But to sit tied to a chair and put into words some of the indignation and tenderness which welled up in her at Isabel's brief account of herself was past her. Only to very young children and to John Tremont had she been known to express her affection in words.

'Your tea's cold,' she said severely, as if reprimanding the girl. 'Pour it out—into that bowl. I'll give you some more. And you must drink it. You will make a very good companion, I'm sure,' she added over the teapot, giving one of her rare sweet smiles. 'After all, youth can be cured, as they say. But perhaps not in time,' she added, as if to herself, and set the pot down, her bent hands trembling.

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Jonah reached forward and gently guided it into place on the tray, but she ignored him. She disliked any recognition of her helplessness other than was absolutely necessary. Jonah smiled at Isabel, thinking she had sensed his grandmother's fierce independence, but she stared at him with a blank blue gaze, and stirred her tea thoughtfully. He felt that he had been unfeeling to expect her to notice him when her mind must be so fraught with the discomforts of her own position. A sudden miserable shyness came over him and he shrank back against the sofa, looking out of the shadowed windows and pretending to have lost interest in the two women. His face burned with the shame of his obtuseness and, as always when he was embarrassed, he was conscious of his injured leg.

There was a long, heavy silence and then the sound of running feet, of the screen door slamming, and there was Jonah's young cousin, Dorothy Parks, in the doorway. Seeing that her grandmother had a guest, she came to a stop, her thin brown hands braced on either side of the doorway. Her dark hair, which curled beyond hope of control, fell to her shoulders and straggled across her forehead. Her middy blouse was stained with some sort of berry juice and the tennis oxfords on her feet were soiled with dust.

'Scuse me, Granny! Didn't see you had company!' She turned to go, giving Isabel one bright and consuming look from her dark eyes—old Jennifer's eyes, brilliant with youth and happiness.

'Of course you don't mind coming in on your old Granny looking like a street gamin,' said Mrs. Tremont acidly.

Jonah knew that it was an effort to keep the affection out of her voice.

The girl in the doorway looked down at her clothes. 'I do look rather smudgy, don't I?' she said easily. 'Maybe I'd better wash.'

She disappeared into the hall and Isabel turned an inquiring glance on Mrs. Tremont.

'My granddaughter,' said the old lady. 'The oldest child of my daughter Lucile, Mrs. Ransome Parks. They spend their

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summers with us. They've lost a boy and have one younger little girl. They're expecting another and I hope it's a boy. Not that it would have the family name. Jonah's the only one has that. He's the one who should carry on this place. He should marry and have several sons.'

Isabel looked at him, and at the sight of his flushed face, threw back her head and laughed. It was a forthright, boyish chuckle which made him furious. She did not in the least seem embarrassed, as he was, by his grandmother's discussion of prospective births.

Dorothy came back at that moment, her face shining and her hair obviously slicked through with a wet comb. Her grandmother shook her head at such hoydenishness, but poured her a cup of tea after introducing her to Isabel.

Dorothy's eyes widened when she realized that Isabel was not a guest, but was to become a part of the household. She shot a quick tentative glance at Jonah, who refused to meet it, knowing from his own confusion of resentment and admiration just what she was feeling. She munched her cookies silently, drinking the tea in deep gusty drafts, her shoulders hunched and her eyes on the face of the older girl.

'I've only two more grandchildren besides these scamps,' said Mrs. Tremont. 'Little Lutie Parks and Evan Crockett. Evan spends the summers with us. He is in school up North in the winter. His mother is dead. She was my oldest daughter. Evan is eighteen. I don't know where he is at the moment, but up to no good, I imagine.'

'He's down on the river with Roy,' said Dorothy. 'They're making a seine.'

'He's never still,' said her grandmother. 'Always out and gone—on a horse, in a boat—away somewhere. He doesn't care two straws for his Granny.'

'Of course he does,' protested Dorothy, unfolding and helping herself to another cup of the now almost black tea. 'But he's shut up in that awful jail all winter. He needs to get out. He

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couldn't live, he says, if he didn't know he was coming to River-ridge in the summer, to you and Grandad and Star (Star is his mare). He loves her above anything in the world,' she added, to Isabel.

'I'm tired,' said their grandmother suddenly. 'Call Sibby, Jonah; I want to go and lie down awhile. And you,' she said to Isabel, 'you will want to put your things away and rest a bit, perhaps. I'll send Jinny to you; she will be your maid. If you want anything just tell her. She's a good girl. I raised her and her mother before her. Now go away, all of you!' she cried, and they rose hurriedly and left, passing the anxious Sibby in the hall.

'Poor Granny,' murmured Dorothy to Isabel, 'she can't bear to have us see her suffer. If she begins to hurt, she shoos us all away.'

'But I want to help her,' said Isabel; 'I want to do something because of what she's doing for me.'

'You can't help the pain. Only Sibby can do that.' She looked at Isabel and smiled suddenly, 'I think,' she said shyly, 'it's going to be wonderful—having you here.'

'Thank you,' said the older girl. There was a moment of embarrassed silence, then she added, 'I guess I'd better go rest now.' She turned and ran up the stairs and Dorothy went out on to the porch where Jonah had gone after speaking to Sibby. Behind her she heard the melancholy creak of the wheel chair being propelled down the hall.

Jonah was lying in the hammock again. But already the world had changed. The sun had begun to descend and its light through the trees was brighter and more dazzling. It sent an orange glow against the house and made his long lashes, shut against it, shimmer with rainbow colours. The sounds from the kitchen were more numerous, and down by the pasture the tinkle of cowbells told of evening's leisurely approach.

Dorothy came at him with her usual impulsiveness. She threw herself upon him, nearly dumping him out of the hammock, making him open his eyes to the merciless brightness.

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'Jo! Isn't she *wonderful*! Isn't she *beautiful*! She looks like a walking doll, only nicer. I bet Evan goes wild about her.'

'Don't be silly!' mumbled Jonah, quick to resent the fact that Dorothy evidently didn't consider him as a possible admirer. 'Granny'd give you what-for if she heard you talking like that.'

'But she is beautiful—you know she is! The littlest hands and the smoothest little feet, and that hair—it's exactly like pully candy, just before it turns white. With those black eyebrows—she's simply stunning!'

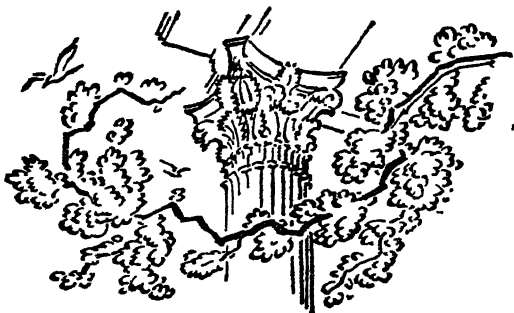
'Bosh! Get off my stomach, you're making me sick.'

He looked into the laughing face so close to his and thought, 'You don't know it, but you're the real beauty.' Her dark laughing eyes caught the sun's rays and turned to a reddish amber. Her teeth, white and even, flashed between the lips of a perfectly formed mouth made for laughter. She was too thin for the period's taste, but not for Jonah—who loved the clear line of her cheek, the swift turn of her head on its narrow neck. She was so close that he could smell the tea still on her breath and the faint fragrance of the tar soap with which she washed her hair. Suddenly she seemed terribly dear to him, not for herself, but because she was his cousin with whom he had grown up in Riverridge, because together they shared associations and traditions of which no one else could know entirely. He felt that since he had lain in this hammock before, this afternoon, more than the sunlight had changed. Isabel Page was no older than they, but her whole upbringing had been more sophisticated. Neither he nor Dorothy had been children for some time, but now he felt that they were depressingly near the end of their youth. To hide his tenderness he pressed her nose down as flat as he could with a cruel thumb and said, 'Get off me, you lummox.'

When she had gone, holding her nose and vowing revenge, he turned and hid his face in the pillow of the hammock, lest anyone see all that he felt. The deep peace of Riverridge, the goodness of

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his life there, was being disturbed. But the disturber had enchanted him. He lay very still, staring at the sun on the grass through the mesh of the hammock. The old familiar dusty smell of the cloth came to him, the sun was hot on his cheek. He began to doze, thinking happily that nothing so terrible had happened after all.



CHAPTER TWO

THE air at the head of the stairs was warmish and tangible. It pressed against Isabel's cheeks and forehead and the backs of her hands like water, as she paused there looking down the long, quiet hall. On either side of a red carpet a number of rooms, screened by inner venetian doors, faced each other. A second hall crossed the long one at the end, and Isabel, conscious that members of the family might be in the rooms she passed, hurried to her own at the corner where the two halls met.

She went in and closed the door behind her, pushing the venetian screens against the wall. For a long moment she stood looking about her, filled with the sense of being alone in a strange place. The room was large and airy, with the same subdued light that the rest of the house held against the brightness outside. White window-blinds reached from ceiling to floor and cast bars of alternate light and shadow on the faded rose-and-grey carpet. She was vaguely aware of massive cherry furniture which glowed from the patient rubbing of brown hands; of the exquisite neatness of the room and of the odour of wax and lavender overlaid by the smell of the sun on the grass without and the faint, spicy fragrance of Jennifer's rose-garden.

She moved across the carpet, watching herself in the huge mirror of the bureau. Unconsciously she drew herself up as though she would match the dignity of the ancient furnishings.

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For a long time she stared at herself in the glass, her thoughts moving as slowly and as pointlessly as the white ruffled curtains which blew in and out on either side of the blinds.

A soft knock at the door startled her. She looked towards it, and as a brown, mischievous eye came around the edge she remembered Jinny, the little maid who was to look after her.

'Come in,' she said, staring at the girl, for blacks were strange to her and Fountain had remained only a moment under her eager scrutiny. 'You're Jinny, aren't you?'

'Yessum, I sho is,' admitted Jinny as she slid into the room and closed the door behind her. 'An' you'se Miss Isabel. I'se come ter he'p you put away yo' t'ings and do whatsomever you wants did.'

She was a small, roundly built girl of a little less than Isabel's own age, neatly dressed in a dotted red calico dress which came to her ankles and was covered with a white apron. She gave forth a not unpleasant fragrance of freshly ironed cloth and starch. In the licorice-like braids wrapped around her head she had thrust a nasturtium blossom.

She grinned whole-heartedly at Isabel, who stared back like a grave child until Jinny said, 'My, you sho is purty! You got hair lak one o' dem yaller roses Miss Jenny tink so much of.'

Isabel smiled and said, 'Thanks,' and the ice having been broken, Jinny moved towards the baggage which Fount had placed in one corner. Isabel handed her the keys. Jinny lifted the top of the small trunk and began to unpack the clothes.

'Yo' clothes is purty, too,' said Jinny, laying stacks of ruffled petticoats away in the bureau. 'Yo' pappy mus' be a mighty rich man.'

'My father's dead,' said Isabel, seating herself in the rocker and watching Jinny's strange brown hands with the curiously pink palms as they handled the garments.

'You po' chile!' said Jinny in quick sympathy. She squatted on her heels and looked at Isabel. 'But don' grieve, honey, you is come ter de rat place ter fergit yo' troubles. Mistuh John he

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don' like nobody 'roun' him to be onhappy. He'll soon git you out o' de mollygrubbles!'

She unfolded a long muslin wrapper, run through with pink ribbons and made with full flowing sleeves, and shook out its transparent fullness.

'Here,' she said firmly, as she rose to her feet, 'you lemme tek off dat 'stiff-neck' dress and put dis on fer yer. Den you lay yo' li'l sef on dat baid an' res'. You jes' got off de train and you mus' be wo' out.'

The black hands were already turning back the heavy crocheted bedspread, plumping the pillows and adjusting the shutters by the bed. Isabel, hypnotized by the suggestion of such complete relaxation, rose and began to undo the numerous hooks in the back of the blouse. Jinny came and finished the job, slipping the clothes from her as tenderly as though the white girl were in pain, holding the wrapper and then moving back to stand enticingly by the plump bed. As Isabel lay down, relishing the feel of cool sheets and the soft down pillows, Jinny darted forward and slipped off the little strapped slippers, saying, 'Dere now, honey, tek you res'. You look as purty as a rosebud.'

'I'm not really tired,' protested Isabel, but her voice trailed into silence. There was such peace in the room that protests seemed too much effort. She snuggled against the pillows, tucking an arm under her head, and gave herself completely to the bed's wide embrace.

Jinny, moving softly about, hummed like a large black bee. There was a rhythmic leisure about her body's every movement that was soothing. Isabel's lashes dropped, and when the coloured girl slipped from the room the newcomer was to all appearances asleep.

But something seemed to have gone with Jinny, some relaxation which had come with her gentle ministrations. Wakefulness pounced upon Isabel like a tangible foe, and her ears, whose hearing had dimmed with drowsiness, were assailed by a hundred little tantalizing sounds. She began to think about the rest of

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the house and its occupants, and to recall the names of the ones Mrs. Tremont had mentioned. She wondered if they were indoors now. She tossed restlessly and was again conscious of the heavy sheets, the huge pillows, and the polished wood of the bed itself. Her thoughts became chaotic, pulled between the scenes and people she had left behind her and the new impressions she was having thrust upon her here. She sighed and buried her face in the pillow, trying to put them from her.

Determinedly she turned her mind to the people she had just met, trying to analyse them, holding them, as it were, against her own temperament to see how they might fit together. She thought of Jennifer, gnarled and defiantly courageous, bound to her wheel chair, but shrewdly aware, Isabel felt sure, of all that went on in the house; of Jonah's dark eyes filled with some expression she could not fathom, of his dragging leg and the tenderness he showed to old Jennifer; of Dorothy's swift adoration, her revealing young face.

Suddenly she knew she wanted to make these people like her, to make herself important, even indispensable to them. No one had ever said so in her presence, but Isabel knew from sly glances, a raised eyebrow here or there, a gesture behind a fan, her mother's almost hysterical affability at social functions, that her father had married beneath him.

In the short time that she had been at Riverridge she had sensed the leisure, the assurance and dignity of a way of life, and now she determined to make it her own. Fate, she was convinced, had brought her here. If it would only keep her here she would make the most of it. She would worm into the place somehow—her mind sped swiftly to Jonah and glanced away, remembering his look of shy embarrassment when Jennifer had said that he should carry on the family name. He was not the type she liked, too shy, too awkward, not dominating enough. But she could put up with these shortcomings if Riverridge, the wealth and the prestige of Riverridge, were to come with him.

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She could picture herself impressing him, gently at first by a glance, by some little considerate kindness making him feel bold and protective, later by more direct appeal.

Her imagination ran away with her and she lay flushed and smiling on the enormous bed, until, soothed into a sensuous self-satiety, she drifted into sleep.

Two hours later she was awakened by a shout of laughter. It came from the yard below. She got off the bed, warmly damp from her sleep, and went to one of the long windows and looked out.

At first she could see nothing, so she pulled back the venetian shutters and stepped out on to the little wrought-iron balcony, one of which aproned each window.

A boy stood in the yard below, his bent head gleaming redly in the setting sun. He moved and she was almost blinded by a flash of brightness from the reel of the fishing-rod on which he was working. He said something in a low tone and was answered by a coloured boy whom Isabel had not noticed, who sat on an old keg under one of the trees.

Almost at the same instant the boy with the rod looked up and saw Isabel. Their eyes met and clung, hers with curiosity, his with astonished admiration.

Sleep had given her a soft colour and made her eyes starry under their black brows. The muslin wrapper falling open showed a breast and shoulders as white as down. Isabel's lips were parted in a tentative smile. Framed in the white window above a mass of climbing red roses, she might have stepped out of a light opera or an old-fashioned Valentine.

The Negro looked up, but Isabel did not notice his gaze of vapid surprise. For at that moment a sudden smile broke across the white boy's face, and instantly she became aware that she had been seen. Drawing the wrapper together, she stepped hastily inside the window and let the curtains fall.

Standing there with her hand still on her breast, Isabel's own lips curved slowly as she thought of the flashing teeth of the boy

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in the yard below, of the sun burnishing his tilted head and the look of laughter and invitation in his keen eyes. He was young, not much older than herself, she had noticed, but he had the assurance of maturity. There was a boldness about him that matched something in herself, something that was just now come to birth.

She was still smiling dreamily when someone tapped at the door. For a moment her heart stumbled and she drew the wrapper closer. But it was only Jinny, as pleasant and solicitous as before, saying, 'I thought I better come wake you. It's mos' seven and we has supper at seven. Come bave yo' face and den I'll bresh dat purty hair.'

'Jinny,' said Isabel, throwing off her wrapper, 'who is the man standing in the yard there? I saw him from the window,' she added, colouring.

Jinny looked out and said instantly, 'Dat ain't no man—das Mistuh Evan. He one o' Miss Jenny's gran'chillun. He's rambunctious and lordly like, not quiet and kind lak Mistuh Jonah.'

'Rambunctious and lordly!' thought Isabel, hiding her glowing face in the cold water of the basin. 'And he *is* a man, although Jinny doesn't know it!'

Sitting before the bureau while Jinny gently brushed her fair hair, Isabel stared at her reflection, wondering how she had looked to Evan Crockett and what he would say when she met him shortly at supper.

Downstairs it was perceptibly cooler and on the long dining-room table two candelabra sent up sprays of yellow light. The family was gathering as Isabel descended the stairs, and seeing so many of them together she felt again a panic of strangeness.

John Tremont was waiting for her in the hall, freshly bathed and dressed in white linen. He tucked her hand under his arm and she was conscious of the feel of the crisp linen, the scent of shaving soap and tobacco that clung to him. She leaned against

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him as Ransome Parks and his wife, Lucile, and Dorothy came into the hall from Jennifer's room.

The introductions came confusedly to her ears, for all the while she was occupied with wondering where Evan Crockett was and when he would appear. She made a lovely picture, her fair hair burnished by Jinny's admiring care, her eyes bright with interest. The white dress she wore was cut square at the throat and against the little twist of hair at her neck Jinny had pinned a black velvet bow which matched in softness the heavy brows.

Frank astonishment and pleasure showed in Ransome Parks's fleshy face, and Lucile, charmed at the sight of the young girl hanging on her father's arm, came forward and kissed her impulsively. Lucile's own face showed the darkened skin and roughness which always accompanied her pregnancies. Under the eyes brown circles gave her a saddened expression and her already cumbersome body was accentuated by the thinness of her arms and hands. If she noticed Ransome's frankly eager stare at the girl, she ignored it.

'Why, how lovely you are!' she said, in a musical voice. 'Dorothy told me—but I couldn't really picture you! How nice to have you with us, dear. I hope you'll be happy at Riverridge.'

'Of course she will!' cried Trémont, patting the hand on his arm. 'How could she help it? Is supper ready—I'm as hungry as a bird dog. Where's Jenny? Oh, there you are!'

He dropped Isabel's arm and turned to take the wheel chair from Sibby's hands. Jennifer looked even paler than she had when Isabel had seen her earlier in the day. She said nothing to them, but allowed her husband to wheel her to the foot of the table, where she sat, barely touching food, for the length of the meal.

'Where are the boys?' asked Lucile, and as if in answer they appeared in the doorway, Jonah dark and shy, Evan looking as poised and suave as his grandfather. Now that she was on a level with him, Isabel saw that he was taller than she by a head and that his nose had the faintest beak to it. His eyes avoided

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hers, and when she was called to his attention and introduced, not a flicker of them betrayed that he had seen her before. He gave her one flashing smile, and then he apparently forgot her.

As the family bent its head for John Tremont's blessing, Isabel raised thick lashes and studied Evan's face, unaware that under his demure exterior he was filled with amusement or that in the round mirror in the centre of the table he was watching her closely.

The blessing over, the room broke into a hum of subdued activity. Delia, standing in the open pantry, bent a bandannaed head almost to the floor, and to Isabel's frank astonishment received a platter of fried chicken from some subterranean cavern below. Dorothy, seeing Isabel's amazed look, said, 'That's the kitchen down there. Chloe cooks and hands it up to Delia and Fount and they serve it.'

Fountain came from the pantry at the moment, with a mound of mashed potatoes and a boat of cream gravy. From then on, it seemed to Isabel, food was passed in a steady stream, accompanied by a series of duckings and incomprehensible, muttered orders.

'Hyere de 'taters.'

'Hu'y wid de co'n.'

'Tek dishyere platter.'

'Did you fetch Miss Page in your buzz-buggy, Mr. Tremont?' asked Ransome, humour giving a timbre to his usually heavy voice.

Isabel looked at him, noting the lines of easy laughter around his eyes, the gleam of gold hairs in his short moustache and on the backs of his huge hands.

John Tremont smiled.

'No. I think a newcomer should see something of the country she passes through and not go whizzing by at fifteen miles an hour. The buggy and Ajax served very well.'

Jonah, watching the curve of his grandfather's thin lips, recalled the picture of him that afternoon, bending close to

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Isabel, smiling at her as he pointed with his whip to this or that of interest along the drive.

He slid careful eyes at his grandmother, but she seemed lost in thought, her own gaze fastened on the flaring candles, a gold flame shining again in each dark pupil. Jennifer Tremont had finished with worrying about her husband and younger women. In the forty-odd years of their marriage he had never so much as spoken of admiring another except in the most impersonal manner.

'It is a beautiful drive,' said Lucile politely. 'Everything is so green now. Do you like the country, Isabel?'

'I'm sure I shall,' Isabel answered demurely. 'It—it frightens me a little yet. It's so big and sort of—lonely.' She turned to Evan, who gave her a bright unfathomable look and said to no one in particular, 'Was that all the biscuits?'

Isabel dropped her eyes and a shadow of annoyance crossed her face. Jonah, alert to all looks, all changes in mood and colour, to study how he could translate these things into words, felt an irrepressible chuckle rising in him as he acknowledged to himself that her innocent looks had been deceptive.

'She won't get anywhere with Evan,' he thought, not without malice. 'Not if she shows so plainly that she's out for him.'

After the long meal Dorothy, pointing through the aperture in the pantry, showed Isabel the kitchen, a vast steamy cavern below the house, opening into the yard which sloped away towards the gardens. Two black stoves squatted like monstrous toads at either end and the walls of whitewashed brick were hung with round black skillets, iron kettles, smoky-bottomed saucepans and woven baskets, great dippers and spoons. On a chair by the window sat Lutie, who had evidently just finished a bowl of some sort of childish pap. She was giving the remains to a scrawny yellow kitten when she looked up and saw Isabel gazing at her. She stared gravely back and then went on feeding the kitten.

'Who's that?' asked Isabel curiously. She wondered if the

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child were abnormal or had been naughty, that she was kept with the servants.

'That's my little sister, Lutie,' said Dorothy carelessly. 'She can't eat a big meal at night—so she has bread and milk in the kitchen. Chloe thinks she hung the moon,' she added, as if that were sufficient explanation.

The rest of the family had left the dining-room and Delia was clearing the tables when the two girls went into the hall. From the porch the voices of the others came in little gusts. There was a small stir when Isabel came out, her white dress mothlike in the twilight. The four men rose to their feet, Jonah stumbling against a chair rocker and gritting his teeth against the sharp agony, glad for the dark which hid his self-conscious flush.

It was Ransome Parks's chair she took, thanking him with an appealing modesty. Dorothy sat on the steps, leaning against the column, and Jonah came and sat by her, nursing his hurt in silence.

The insects had grown louder and the velvet darkness of the yard was filling with fireflies. Far off in the woods sounded the tremulous whimper of an owl and Ransome Parks began to hum,

'Who is dat yonder? Who is dat yonder?
Looks lak mah Lord, comin' in a cloud!'

'Hush, Ransome; you give me the creeps!' said Jennifer, stirring impatiently in her chair.

Ransome laughed and said, 'Do you play, Miss Page?'

'Play?' Isabel brought herself to attention. She had been vainly seeking Evan's bright head. He had made no sound since his offer to her of a chair and she wondered if he had slipped away or was watching her with those bright, cynical eyes which could probably penetrate more than a summer's darkness.

'Piano—violin—harp.'

'Oh! Oh, no. But I adore music.'

'We'll have to have some one night soon.' It was Jennifer speaking. 'Ransome plays very well—for a man.'

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He laughed again, recognizing this as a taunt, and touched her knee in a gentle shake.

'I adore to hear men play,' said Isabel. 'They have such certain touch.'

Jonah looked back of him, wishing he could see Evan. He wondered if Isabel sounded as stilted to the older boy as she did to him. And then, as he so often did, he reproached himself for leaping to unkind conclusions. No doubt it was her shyness that made her stiff. Who was he to laugh at another's awkwardness! He stirred unhappily, and touched Dorothy's hand. Its young warmth was moving. He lifted it and put a kiss in its palm, folding the fingers in upon it and whispering, 'Something for you.' He could hear the laughter in her voice as she leaned near him, her unruly dark hair blowing against his cheek, and whispered, 'I'll never, never give it back!' She fell over on him, puppywise, and he held her to him, loving the childish unself-consciousness of her yielding girl-body. He blew in her neck till she squealed and turned to thump him.

They were absorbed in their play and lost track of the talk on the porch until Jonah heard his grandmother say sharply, 'Evan! Evan! Where's the boy got to? Can't stay in one place five minutes.'

Jonah pushed Dorothy from him, thinking of Evan, who was free to come and go where he pleased, who was too old in his ways to scuffle with little girls. But not too good to scuffle with older ones, perhaps, thought Jonah bitterly. He wondered if Evan had slipped from the porch and dropped quietly down across the grassy lawn, going into the road below where presently he would meet some tenant farmer's easy-going daughter to kiss and cuddle under the dark trees. Or had he gone to the back of the house and in the barn saddled Star for a ride under the deep sky? Whatever he'd done, it had been a man's way, free and solitary, asking permission of no one. Jonah would not have cared to worry or offend his grandparents as Evan did, but he often tossed on his own bed, waiting for Evan's step on the

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outside stairway, filled with envy and grudging admiration. Evan's absence now cast him into a moody restlessness.

The talk was desultory, of neighbours, of the weather, of horses and crops, of the house the Ransome Parks were building. There were several polite attempts to include Isabel, but her flat, disinterested voice, her lack of any familiarity with their way of living, made the effort clumsy and unsuccessful. Dorothy, repulsed by Jonah, went and sat at Isabel's feet, but since she had not the boldness to touch her goddess and since the darkness concealed her adoring gaze from its subject, this move was of little satisfaction to either of them.

At long last John Tremont rose, murmuring of a busy day ahead. Ransome stretched and yawned and Lucile got up stiffly, groaning under her breath at the discomfort. They broke up with 'Good nights' and Dorothy went with Isabel to her room, lingering near the door and watching the older girl with bright, hungry eyes until Lucile called her to come to bed.

Alone in the room which now seemed vast in the shadowy lamplight, Isabel suffered a sense of defeat and disappointment. She resented the fact that she had not made a conquest of Evan and that, further, he had been so indifferent that he had left her company without a word.

They had all accepted her advent most casually, and her beauty, of which she was far too shrewd not to be conscious, had failed to get her what she sought.

She was depressed by this, by the strangeness of her surroundings, and by the feeling that the women of the family classed her as a child with Dorothy and perhaps even Lutie. Staring at herself in the glass as she undid her dress, she recalled the grave look which Lutie had given her. There seemed, in Isabel's present state of depression, something inimical in that gaze. She wondered, too, if Mrs. Tremont's silence at supper had been one of disapproval. Perhaps she planned to send her away because of her unexpected youth.

At the thought of going back to an obviously uncordial step-

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father and a mother whose own shallow prettiness was endangered by a beautiful daughter, and who resented it bitterly, Isabel's spirits sank completely.

She crawled into bed and lay rigidly miserable. Strange bumps and thumps about the house emphasized the fact that she alone was unfamiliar with the great house and its occupants.

Outside the wind stirred gently in the trees, the insects called in raucous monotones and far away in the vasty darkness a train whistle made its lonesome moan. In answer an owl stirred and whimpered fretfully, and Isabel, with a sudden desperate movement, thrust her head under her pillow and pulled it close about her ears, overwhelmed with loneliness and dislike.



CHAPTER THREE

RIVERRIDGE stood on a slight slope half-way between the river and the road. Its acres lay to the north and south in wood and bluegrass, grain and tobacco. The house was of brick, painted white to hide the scars of fire and sword which the Civil War had imposed on it, and its tall columns, rising to the second storey, could be seen for miles around. The front door was one of the most beautiful in a section given to graceful architecture. Five feet wide, it opened almost the whole end of the hall, as if the hospitality of Riverridge wished to embrace the community—which indeed it sometimes did.

When John Tremont had brought home his bride, she had undertaken the rehabilitation of the house with enthusiasm and vigour. Having none of the sentimental background for the Negroes which her neighbours had and a healthy respect for class, she felt no hesitancy in putting them to work with the same energy. They were not long in appreciating the richness of her larder, for Jennifer was a wealthy woman and could command commodities which her less fortunate friends could not afford, and she had little trouble in getting and keeping a fine staff of servants, culled from the rapidly disillusioned free Negroes, many of whom had belonged to the Tremont family.

As might have been expected, the ease and lavishness with

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which she restored Riverridge, while her neighbours in as beautiful houses struggled to keep out the wind and the rain, and while women in her own class bent to distasteful and unaccustomed tasks, brought down upon her a tremendous storm of envy and criticism. But she was quick to sense this and immediately began to make adjustments and to share her wealth and her servants in a hundred tactful and irresistible ways. At the same time she became as ardent as any born Southerner could have been, so that eventually her beauty, her infectious gaiety, the fact that she had married a Tremont, her money and her willingness to be neighbourly prevailed. She erased the impression of bad taste which her enthusiastic spending had given, and became at last a subject of local pride and delight. As the years passed and times grew easier, Riverridge reassumed its rightful place as a social centre. The family portraits, their sabre-slashed canvases mended and carefully cleaned, looked down upon such festivity as had not been seen for years. Lights streamed from the windows, the floors gleamed with beeswax, the gorgeous old silver was brought out and polished until it blinded, and the odour of wax and 'conservatory' flowers, mint juleps and barbecue became practically permanent.

Behind the house, the gardens and the chicken-runs, the fields rolled away to the river fringed with trees—hackberries, oak, blackgum, and cedar. To the north, at the river's edge, rose a mighty bluff of solid stone blanketed with a thin layer of mossy soil, a few straggling pines and laurel bushes. In the spring and fall it was covered near the lower slopes with frail white flowers and rosy masses of buckberry. The children of the family had always loved to picnic on the bluff, but were forbidden ever to go there alone by Jennifer, who had a fear of heights. It would have meant instant death to any child who fell from its flatrock summit into the shallow river below. Her own children had been taught such caution of it that it would never have occurred to them to go there alone, but her grandchildren played all over it—all but little Lutie, who inherited her grandmother's phobia

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and covered her face with her arms and wept if the boys, to tease her, went near the edge.

The gaiety of Riverridge had slowed down somewhat, now. Long years of child-bearing and the tragedy of numerous deaths—four of Jennifer's children had died in a week of diphtheria; one had had a lingering malaria; only three had reached adulthood—had intervened, and for some years now the creeping incapacity of arthritis had bound her closer and closer to her room.

Twelve years before Isabel Page had come to Riverridge, Jennifer's last and most-loved son, Jonah's father, had been killed with his lovely young wife in a railroad wreck. John Tremont had brought the frightened and lonely little boy back with him, and he and Jennifer had done everything possible to make a happy home for the child, who looked at them with their own son's dark eyes and who had the sensitive intuition and the physical grace of his mother. He had been only five at the time and adaptable, as most children are. He had loved Riverridge with all his heart, and adored his grandfather, who let the little lad follow him wherever he went.

Tremont taught Jonah to ride well by the time he was six. He talked to him as though he were a man about the affairs of the farm, about the various Negroes, the crops, the stock. Jonah, in his company, grew old and wise beyond his years. Only the companionship of his cousins, Dorothy Parks and her younger brother, John, had kept him childlike at all.

When he was ten a horse had fallen on him and crushed his foot. Bad surgery and a consequent infection had left the leg twisted and malformed. Gone were the long, lovely hours on horseback, for the leg turned so that it pained him to ride more than a short way. Gone were the rambles in the woods alone or with one of the coloured boys from the farm, a hound or a setter to stir up rabbits; long, leisurely, innocent, priceless hours of seemingly endless youth. John Tremont had been inconsolable when after weeks of pain and confinement it became obvious

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that Jonah would never be whole again. He had set himself to making new interests for the boy he so adored, and Jennifer had often seen them side by side on the broad white steps of the porch, like two pale ghosts in the moonlight, their shoulders touching, while John talked of the stars and the planets or told stories of Gettysburg, Atlanta, Chickamauga, and Murfreesboro. By the hearth they sat and read aloud to each other. The Iliad, the Odyssey, Dickens, Thackeray, and the poets. There grew a bond between them so deep and so pure that it seemed nothing could ever break it. Jennifer tried to tell herself that out of this nettle, tragedy, they had plucked a most beautiful flower—the flower of a perfect friendship. But secretly her heart burned with anger at a Fate which had left the last to bear the family name a crippled recluse.

Two years after Jonah's accident, little John, Lucile's boy, always a delicate child, had been stricken with typhoid and died without a struggle. Almost at once word came from Chicago, where Ethel Tremont had gone after her marriage to Allen Crockett, that she too had succumbed to the dread disease. Ethel left a son, Evan Tremont Crockett, who, because his father had to travel, was sent to Riverridge for the summers. Jennifer had hoped that the boy might find a place in Lucile's heart and in some way make up for little John's death. But after his first shock and grief for his mother had passed, Evan was revealed as a difficult and rowdy youngster, so unlike the quiet John that not even Jennifer could see anything to endear him to Lucile. He, like Jonah, delighted in the farm, and, as Jonah no longer could, rode and tramped to his heart's content. He was ruddy like the Crocketts, an odd bird in a nest of black ones.

Lutie was two when John had died, a sunny amiable baby, the pet of all the Negroes and whites on the place. Lucile coddled and fussed over her, moved to exaggerated anxiety by little John's death, until Jennifer lost all patience with her and threatened to take the child to Riverridge to stay, winter and summer, unless Lucile gave over worrying so about her.

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This year Lucile and her husband were expecting their fourth child. They were building their own home to the south of the Riverridge house, and Lucile had lost, for the first time since little John's death, something of the melancholy which had haunted her.

The Ransome Parks were staying at Riverridge, because they always spent part of each summer there, and to be near the scene of the building. Lucile dreamed of having her child in the new house. She had a superstition that this was to mark a new beginning for them all and that the new baby would bring her the joy and the expectations which had never come to fulfilment in John. She busied herself with plans of curtains and rugs, furniture and fixtures, and Ransome, who could easily afford to indulge her, welcomed these signs of a return to normal living with deep thankfulness.

Ransome Parks was a big man whose blue eyes shone from a flushed, lively face. He loved people, and Lucile's self-imposed mourning had worked a real hardship on him. He possessed a rich baritone which he would use on the slightest provocation. He knew dozens of ballads and sentimental songs and on many an evening at Riverridge he made the windows tremble with 'Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes,' 'Bedelia,' or 'She's Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage.'

He was a favourite with Jennifer, who relished his vigour and his great good-humour. He was like the hunting men she had known in England, bluff and kind and jovial, and not too intellectual for everyday enjoyment. The winter holidays were always spent at the farm with numerous cousins and in-laws invited to share the great house and the bounteous larder, and no child who ever went there forgot the sight of Jennifer Tremont—handsome in a curious, classic way, her small features alight under the piles of her black hair—waltzing with her robust son-in-law on a floor cleared for them by their numerous admirers. On the first Christmas that she was unable to dance, he sat on a sofa with his arm around her, refusing to dance even

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with his wife, and telling each one who passed that he was 'sitting this one out with my best girl.' The act, which came easily to him, for he liked to dramatize himself, touched her more than he would ever guess. She was fonder of him than she was of her own daughter, whom she called a 'soppy' person.

It was an unfair adjective. Lucile was merely a gentle and extremely tender woman. Ran's bluntness and vitality often frightened or shocked her, though she adored him and envied him the ability to be at ease with any person with whom he was thrown.

John Tremont left most of the management of the family to Jennifer. With the exception of his devotion to Jonah, he took no part in their instruction, correction, or ambitions. The managing of the farm, his own interests—hunting, riding, and reading—absorbed him. Thanks to Jennifer he was without financial anxiety. He liked the people who were continually about him, and little domestic difficulties he depended on his wife to straighten out. This new member of an already sprawling household made no more impression on him than the acquisition of a new calf or colt or a new litter of pups. He had done his duty to an old friend by taking Isabel into his home. Her adjustment there would not be his concern.

Before Isabel had finished her tea on the day of her arrival, he had changed into riding-boots and a soft brown shirt and was striding off across the fields to interview his foreman. If occasionally the vision of her exquisitely fair face came before him, it was no more than the memory of any other lovely thing. She was a child. He hoped young Dorothy would like her, but aside from that he gave her no thought.



CHAPTER FOUR

DOWN in the house servants' quarters in the north wing of Riverridge Chloe opened one eye and stared with resentful incredulity at the square of light which was her window. Every ounce of her two hundred and thirty pounds told her that this was some fiendish trick of nature. It *couldn't* be daylight that she saw. It had only been a cat's wink of time since she let her weary bulk down into bed. She opened the other eye and challenged nature with a hard reptilian stare. Under the lids, wrinkled like the lids of a very old turtle, her black eyes with their cloudy whites tried hard to stare daylight down. It didn't work. It never had. It never would. With a groan of resignation she pulled herself up out of the welter of quilts and the feather softness of the mattress and sat on the edge of the bed, grunting and stretching, saying, 'Er Gawd! Er Lawdy! Anudder day!'

She rose and in her shift began to move about the room, making such toilet as she must, shivering a little in the chill of very early morning.

This wing, built on after the main part of the house, was of the same white-painted brick. The first floor of the house was well above ground, but these lower rooms were on a ground level and were seldom really hot. In winter they were secure and warm, but in fall and spring, covered from the sun's rays, they stayed chilly till late in the morning.

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Chloe opened the door and stood blinking at the yard. The dew, as yet unlit by the sun, lay white as frost over the thick grass. Under the big hackberry tree in the yard the old setter rose stiffly and came towards her, wagging a faintly expectant tail. She ignored him, but he followed her hopefully across the courtyard, around the corner of the other wing, and stood patiently at the door when she entered the dim kitchen.

Fount had raked out the ashes and laid the fire. Its cheerful sputter and crackle was comforting in the chill of the big room. Chloe took down an apron from a nail on the wall, fumbled in the pocket of her skirt, and took out the pantry keys.

It had been Jennifer Tremont's custom, as it was the custom of housewives throughout the community, to lay out the supplies for each meal. No matter how late the party or how tired the mistress of each house, she unlocked the pantry and laid out the materials for breakfast—so many eggs, so many thick slices of ham (she often cut them while wearing an apron tied hastily over a ball gown), so much meal for hoecakes, or flour for waffles, so much lard and coffee. All the supplies, bought in huge quantities, were kept under lock and key, lest pilfering and waste bring ruin to the household. This was a custom carried over from slave days and was seldom resented by servants.

Years ago Jennifer had discovered that Chloe was a better manager of foodstuffs than she, herself, and that Chloe's vigilance of the storerooms was better because of her constant presence near-by. So Jennifer had, after impressing Chloe with the importance of her trust, turned the keys over to her during that period when she herself was incapacitated by frequent child-bearing, and she had never had cause to regret it.

Now Chloe unlocked the door to the cavernous storeroom and took a lantern from the stone wall. She carried it to the stove and lighted it with a newspaper spill. It shone but faintly in the kitchen, but when she hung it in the storeroom again it threw her shadow monstrous and misshapen on the opposite wall. Black blobs of darkness and irregular patches of light filled the

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room, and flickered from the bright tin basin into which she dipped a pile of flour. She measured out all the ingredients needed for battercakes and took the basin into the kitchen. She came back to fetch eggs and coffee, a slab of smoky bacon, a pat of home-made butter wrapped in a napkin. The room smelled of the lantern, of cheese and bacon and ham. There was an earthy smell of dampness, too, although the ground beneath her feet was as dry as dust.

She made a last trip to blow out the lantern, her nostrils widening at the smell of the oily wick. She locked the door and slipped the keys into her pocket. She was just lifting down the big enamelled coffee-pot when Fount came in with two pails of water. Their bright zinc linings caught the first rays of the sun and blinded her as she turned to meet him.

She measured the coffee, and its pungent fragrance filled the room. Outside a rooster cried, coolly and shrilly. The day at Riverridge had begun.

At ten o'clock that morning three of the household were gathered in Jennifer's room. Jennifer herself, bathed and in a fresh nightdress, her hair in two thick pepper-and-salt plaits over her shoulders, sat propped against gigantic feather pillows. The bed was freshly made and the snowy hand-woven spread laid back in a wide fold across her lap. Her tortured hands lay one upon the other in front of her. Lutie, seated on a stool at the bed's side, noticed how the morning sun shone through the ruffled embroidered cuffs of the long-sleeved gown and made a scattered pattern of little sun-spots, like white apple seeds, on the age-darkened hands.

Lutie was sewing on a cup towel, making laborious crooked stitches and stopping every so often to suck a pricked thumb. Her lovely brow, already delicate and clear-cut in her still infantile face, was bent seriously above her work. She hated sewing, which, as Jennifer pointed out sternly, was all the more reason for doing it. The cup towel was red and white with little dark spots which were Lutie's own blood and it was getting dingy

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from many weeks of stitching and ripping out. Lutie looked at the clock despairingly. It seemed to have stopped at ten, and she must sew until half-past.

Near the wide curtained window, so that the light fell on her book, and on her incredibly fair hair, sat Isabel, reading aloud. She was wearing a white cotton shirtwaist and skirt and a demure black bow tie. She disliked her task as thoroughly as Lutie, but concealed it with more grace. The book was a much-discussed novel, *The House of Mirth*. Jennifer loathed old ladies who read only the Duchess, Mrs. Southworth, or Charlotte M. Yonge. She subscribed to the *New York Times* and kept up with what was new in music, poetry, and art. As to novels, she devoured them and liked a little spice when she met it. Unfortunately in her day, as Jonah was to reflect much later, the spice was of the mildest sort.

She had hesitated about letting Isabel—so young and so innocent—read this particular book, but her insatiable curiosity about it made her yield to the temptation, though it was obvious soon after the girl began to read that her mind was anywhere but on the story. She read atrociously, and Jennifer, rather than have her anticipated treat murdered in such a fashion, shut her ears to the sound and began to think about something else. It was a trick she had perfected soon after becoming established in the South when all of her friends and neighbours prefaced any anecdotes with 'That was Cud'n Susy Flynn, y'know. She came from McMinnville. Her mother was a Drew—of the Murfreesboro Drews, y'know. Susy married Temple Smith—son of Rufus and Betsy Po'ter Smith—the Po'ters have been farmers in middle Tennessee for yeahs and yeahs!'

After five years she knew who every man and woman and child were related to 'collaterally, backwards, and forwards,' as she told John Tremont—and that's when she had learned to think of other things: the new book she was reading, the roses she planned to train along the pike wall, her mother's garden of herbs in Cornwall, of John or of the children.

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She was thinking of Isabel now, wondering about the girl's future. Sixteen years old! She tried to picture the woman John's friend had married late in life, a woman younger by many years than he and one who, even before her husband's death, considered marriage with another. Adultery, the Bible called it, plain out. Thinking it was as bad as doing it, the Book said. She couldn't imagine being married to any man except John, she thought, leaning back against the immense pillows with grateful ease. His slenderness, his dark laughing eyes, the long lines of humour in his lean face, his grace and *savoir faire*—they enchanted her today as they had when she first laid eyes on him. Her children had never meant to her what he had—not even those who had died. She had been comforted for them by his steady love.

In the parlour Dorothy was supposed to be practising. Instead she was playing 'Last Night' and singing the words in a young, tremulous and meant-to-be passionate voice . . .

'Last night the nightingale woke me,
Last night when all was still,
It sang in the dumtity moonlight
Upon the woodland hill.
It sang in the dumtity dumm moonlight
And all in the sil-v'ry dew.
And oh, my darling the bird was singing,
Singing of you-ooo, of youooooooooooooo!'

Dorothy's voice broke with the strain, and a grin tugged at Jennifer's mouth. She had not missed the look of calf-like adoration in Dorothy's eyes when they fastened on Isabel's blonde loveliness. It wouldn't hurt her, thought Jennifer. It might cure her of some of her hoydenish, tom-boy ways. Isabel was pretty and she had an air. She turned and looked at the girl again. The red lips moved laboriously, the lashes were black against the pale, oval cheeks.

'Damn!' said Lutie in a small, birdlike voice, and sucked a thumb which had sprung a bright red bead.

'You may leave the room,' said Jennifer, suddenly alert.

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'When you have learned to conduct yourself like a lady, you may come back and apologize. But you will have no peppermint this morning.'

Lutie rose and folded the cup towel very neatly and deliberately in the seat of the stool. She did not look at her grandmother. She couldn't because tears weighed heavily at her lashes. She walked from the room sturdily, and Jennifer watched, suddenly loving her so fiercely that it hurt. Isabel had stopped reading at Jennifer's first stern words, and stared after Lutie now with her own lips parted childishly. Lutie went out of the door, closing it carefully behind her. They heard her feet whisper for a moment on the carpet and then there was stillness except for the noises in the yard.

'Don't read any more, child,' said Jennifer, lying back again, 'I want to talk to you.'

'It's come,' thought Isabel and went cold inside. She closed the book obediently and rose and went and stood by the bed. Jennifer raised her head and looked up at her.

'You are very pretty,' she said gently, 'and you have no money, no home but this one. You must learn young, my child, that in this world you either make your life—or it makes you. The first way is best.'

She paused, her mind going back to the day when she was young, with a clear, flawless skin like this—no, not like this, but with a creaminess and softness like a magnolia petal. Isabel, standing near the bed, leaning her young thighs against the high mattresses, stared at Jennifer's face as it was now. The skin was very white and looked as though it had been brushed over with powder. It had none of the soft furze seen on so many old faces. But it was as criss-crossed as a tea-strainer and lay delicately along the fine small bones.

Jennifer was thinking of John Tremont as he had been when she had first seen him, his eyes raised to the blue of her English skies, his lean young face made sweet by the lines of sadness about a mouth too young for grief. She had made up her mind

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then and there that he was what she wanted most in the world. And she had got him, and it had been good—always.

She reached over and took one of Isabel's hands laboriously in her own. She looked at it as it lay in her swollen palm. It was a trim hand, rounded and turned at the wrist like a doll's. The slightly plump fingers tapered and curved in. It was a greedy hand but very appealing. Jennifer gave it a slight shake.

'Yes, my dear, the world—this world—has changed. Nobody thinks anything of you nowadays if you don't have *things* to show for your success. And anybody who has the money and can buy them—is considered all right.'

She sighed and looked out of the window, across the trellises where the roses climbed in florid masses, out over the pale fields of tobacco, the dark simmering acres of young corn, to the river.

'When I came here I, too, was a stranger—an alien.' She paused. 'Everyone buys his place in the world, one way or another. A young and beautiful woman must buy hers by her charm or her wit. People say my money bought me what I wanted. It didn't—entirely. It restored the house and the grounds, it brought people here; but what I really wanted I got by putting first things first—John's love, the gracious ways of life—— Yes, you must learn what you want most—and put those things first.'

She gave Isabel's hand a little toss, and released it.

'We must have some parties. You must meet some eligible young men. Not that you aren't welcome here as long as you live, my dear, but you are too pretty. We cannot hope to keep you—forever.'

Isabel smiled uncertainly, and Jennifer, taking the book from her, said: 'Don't take me too seriously. Be happy. But what I said is true. You have to go after the things you want. And you have to decide what counts most—for you. Now run along. I think Dorothy is waiting for you. And I think you should write to your mother if you haven't, and tell her that you have arrived safely.'

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Isabel said, 'Thank you—I will,' and went demurely from the room.

As the door closed, Jennifer lay back against her pillows, book lying idly against her breast, and stared out at the sunlight. There was something about Isabel that pulled at her, something that made her want to protect the child. And then when she looked into those long deep eyes she felt repelled, as though under her slightness and fair innocence Isabel knew more, was harder, than Jennifer had ever been. For a moment she regretted her cynical advice and was depressed. Then she smiled at her own foolishness, picked up the book, and, straining her eyes, began to read, settling at once into a sensuous enjoyment of the story.

Outside Jennifer's door Isabel stood still, her head bent, gazing unseeingly at the carpet. What Jennifer had said went around and around in her mind, falling into place like the figures of a kaleidoscope. She wondered if something lay behind the words that she should have read into them, some hint, some double meaning. She was annoyed to think that she might have been stupid, or appeared gawky or young. At the same time she took comfort in the reassurance that she was not to be sent away, and felt a natural, girlish excitement at the possibility of parties.

The piano stopped abruptly and as suddenly Isabel started from her position. She had no desire to be with Dorothy now. She felt that this was the most decisive moment in her life and that she must form her attitude at Riverridge now, for all time. Hurrying through the hall she met Dorothy's eyes in the parlour mirror; the younger girl's face was eager with innocent adoration. Isabel tightened her lips and moved rapidly forward, staring through her as though she were a shadow. Ignoring the fact that Dorothy called to her, she ran quickly up the stairs.

In her room, with the door closed, she paced back and forth, her head bowed and her hands clasped before her in an unconsciously mature pose.

'You have to decide what counts most for you,' Jennifer had said.

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'You have to go after the things you want. Nobody thinks anything of you now if you haven't things to show for your success.'

Success. What success could an ignorant girl achieve in this world except to be the mistress of a place like this; to own acres, to manage servants, to drive forth in a luxurious carriage and to be accepted socially in other homes as gracious? She stopped her pacing, and her mind began to go over the parts of the house she had already seen and to imagine the rest. The portraits, the old carpets, worn but obviously fine, the grace of the house's architecture and the handsome, massive furniture, the silver and fine china, flowers and rare ornaments. These were the possessions of people who had had wealth so long that it was like a second physical shape to them. They were no more aware of it than they were of their own skins. Actual money, she was acute enough to see, might come and go, but this inherited *sense* of wealth would remain for them even if they lost the material symbols of it. She, herself, must have the symbols. Suddenly they became more important to her than anything she had yet known. This, then, was what Jennifer meant—this was what she, Isabel, would choose. She wanted to become a part of all this, to move among these people and these things as though she belonged.

She must buy these things which she had decided were most important. Her determination, formed the evening before, to make herself indispensable, took on a new significance—not only indispensable, but a *part* of them! She was young, she was lovely—she stepped to the mirror and looked closely at herself, her flushed cheeks, her dark, sparkling eyes, the carriage of the fair head, yes, she was irresistibly lovely!—she would be meeting other people, people in the same circumstances as the Tremonts, and she would use her loveliness and her wits to the best advantage possible!

A fleeting, contemptuous memory of her mother, who had never been able to assimilate culture or command prestige, flashed through her excited brain. For a moment she was grateful for her mother's naïve nature which had been so pitifully revealing.

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No one—*no one*—not even the man she married would ever know that Isabel had not been 'to the manner born.' Or was it 'manor'? It didn't make any difference, she thought, throwing herself full length on the freshly made bed; she would have wealth, position, beauty—everything that the human heart could desire! She clapped the sides of her small feet together in childish excitement, and lay gazing out over the gardens and woods of Riverridge, lost in a fervent dream of the future.

Downstairs, Dorothy had been stopped by Isabel's impatient glance as by a bullet. For a long moment she gazed after the older girl's retreating figure with a hurt and incredulous stare. If Isabel had slapped her she could not have made it more plain that she did not want to be bothered by Dorothy's attentions. Standing by the piano Dorothy traced a wide circle on the immaculately waxed top, and felt hot, sudden tears well up under her lids and a dull ache clutch her throat. She was too miserable to move for a long time. The house was very still. No sound came from her grandmother's room. She wondered if Isabel had been dismissed from the austere presence—if Jennifer had scolded her. Surely not—a forty-eight-hour guest! Yet Isabel had looked flushed and excited, even sullen. Perhaps Jennifer had told her that she could not stay! Dorothy's heart gave one tremendous thump, and she moved quickly out of the room and up the stairs, her tennis shoes making almost no sound on the stair carpet. At the top, out of sight of anyone coming or going in the hall below, she sat down, crossed her brown young arms upon her knees and stared down the hall at Isabel's door.

The newel post pressed painfully against Dorothy's back and the bones of her thighs seemed to cut into the floor. But neither of these discomforts was felt as keenly as the agony which that closed door made in her heart. Again and again she saw Isabel's eyes in the parlour mirror, narrow and cold with dislike, and each time she recalled them the ache in her throat deepened. At last she could stand it no longer. She got up stiffly and crept to the end of the hall. At Isabel's door she stopped, and her breathing

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stopped with her. She listened, straining for any sound, but none came. Finally with a guilty glance up and down the two halls she stooped and looked through the keyhole.

She could see the high cherry bed, the white bolster and Isabel's feet waving in the air. It was obvious that she was lying face down. Could she be crying? Could it really be that Jennifer had refused to let her stay? The thought was too awful. Dorothy straightened up and knocked frantically on the door.

The interruption was annoying to Isabel, who was lost in a scheme of intriguing Jonah and becoming the future mistress of Riverridge. Rolling over she leaned on one elbow and said sharply, 'What is it? What do you want?'

'It's—it's me,' said Dorothy timidly, and came in, closing the door behind her.

For a minute Isabel considered saying that she did not wish to be disturbed, but the look of abject dejection and worship on Dorothy's face made her change her mind. You could not have too many cohorts in any campaign, she decided quickly. You never knew when loyalty and affection might have to be called upon.

She sat up, adjusting her tone and expression quickly. She put her hands to her hair in a shy and appealing gesture.

'Oh, it's you!' she cried, as though Dorothy were the one being she most wanted to see this side of Paradise. 'Come in. I'm sorry I sounded so cross—I'm so frightfully worried!'

She felt that 'frightfully' was an adult word. It would appeal to Dorothy and at the same time make her feel the vast difference in their mental ages.

Isabel slid off the bed and went towards the girl, whose dark face was alight with relief and pleasure. 'I saw you downstairs, but I knew you were practising,' she went on, taking Dorothy's hand and leading her to a chair near the bureau with a motion of utter cordiality. 'I tried not to let you see me. I—I don't want to upset any rules here—change your ways of doing things in any way. I'm just a very insignificant outsider,' she added, her mouth

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drooping softly. 'You can't know, because you've never had anything else, how wonderful—how utterly wonderful—having a home like this is.'

'But, Isabel!' Dorothy cried chokingly, almost overcome with joy, relief, adoration, and heartbreak at Isabel's pathos. 'It's your home too, now! It is, isn't it? Isn't that what Granny said? Didn't she say you must stay here as long as you like? You will stay, won't you? You will, oh, *surely* you won't go away from Riverridge if you think it's so wonderful!'

Isabel, seating herself before the big bureau, watched the flushed and yearning face in the glass and a warm sense of power seeped through her. She said primly, 'I'll stay as long as your grandmother will let me, I'm sure. It's such a beautiful place.'

'Oh, look at me!' she added, in a new tone, 'I'm a fright! My hair—it's every which way! And Jinny had done it up so nicely. I guess I'll have to call her to do it over.'

Dorothy sprang up, knocking over a stool with a puppy's clumsiness.

'Let me!' she urged. 'Oh, do let me! It looks so soft and yellow, like—like I don't know what, but I want to fix it. I'll comb it so gently you'll never feel it.'

She fairly teetered with eagerness and Isabel, moved out of her affection, laughed with natural amusement.

Watching Dorothy as her fingers moved through the fall of her fair hair, Isabel knew that she had struck the right note. She realized perhaps for the first time that nothing is so binding as the selfless devotion of one person to another.

When the pale ring of hair was again in place and a blue bow of Dorothy's choosing pinned at the back, Isabel sighed.

'That's nice,' she said approvingly. 'That's—oh!' She made a little grimace of pain and felt her neck. 'I must have gotten stiff, sitting here so long.'

She rubbed at her neck ineffectively, and Dorothy, all concern, said: 'Here, let me. We'll undo your collar—sit here in this low

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chair—and I'll rub it out for you. I'm good at that. I rub Granny a lot when the pain isn't too bad.'

Isabel lay against the back of the chair, her head turned away, and Dorothy standing behind her rubbed her shoulder, and the smooth creamy neck. She chattered about Riverridge, about Evan, about the servants, and by skilful and seemingly indifferent questioning Isabel learned things she had suddenly become interested in—the size and nature of crops, the number of servants at Riverridge, the status of each member of the family.

She did not smile as she listened. A tiny frown of concentration came between the thick brows, but her eyes lighted with a vivid satisfaction, and along the narrow lids there lay an expression of conscious slyness.

When Lutie walked out of her grandmother's room, she first thought of going to the kitchen. If there was a cake to be baked, it was about time that Chloe would be making it, and perhaps she could be persuaded to make some little ones in the empty eggshells. And if there was icing, Lutie could scrape the bowl. She could almost taste the moist, thick sweetness just thinking about it.

She went into the dining-room, avoiding the cold stare of the tall silver pheasants which presided over the sideboard, and going to the pantry she squatted down and peeked into the kitchen. Chloe was sitting in a low shuck-bottomed chair, made especially broad to accommodate her tremendous buttocks. Between her widespread knees she held a granite pan and from a deep, cup-shaped basket she took handfuls of beans which she strung with indifference and dropped in broken pieces into the pan. Her mouth was thrust out in deep, if not sullen, thought, and her hands moved with a hypnotic rhythm.

Lutie, who knew Chloe's every mood, gave a little sigh of disappointment and rose laboriously with her hands on her knees.

She went into the hall again and out of the front door, turning left to her grandmother's flower-garden. Usually she could spend hours there, while from her chair Jennifer directed the long-tutored Pompey who tended each plant as though it were a prize

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specimen. Jennifer had taught Lutie the secret garden games she had, as a lonely child, played in her mother's Cornwall garden years ago—how doll money lies neatly packed in hollyhock seed pockets; how hyacinth blossoms, picked from their juicy stems and turned upside down with pins thrust through them, made gay ladies at a party; how morning-glory seeds, cinnamon-vine seed, and sour-grass pods make coffee beans, potatoes, and cucumbers for hollyhock ladies to buy at market.

This morning her grandmother's presence was too vivid here, the memory of her frown of disapproval too fresh. She opened the white picket gate which led into the garden enclosure and hurried through, passing the familiar borders of hollyhocks, just coming into flagrant bloom, the bush roses, so carefully pruned and mulched, and still, in the late June heat, aflame with delicate colour. She stepped between the square hills of strawberry plants whose parent roots had come from England, and passed unseeing the borders of parsley, beds of larkspur, Shasta daisies, corn-flowers, poppies and tiger lilies, herbs and fragrant geraniums. The sweet breath of lemon verbena and lavender, made heavy by the warm sun, blew on her and she hurried, feeling almost as if her grandmother trod upon her heels. She did not need to look at the garden to be aware of it—all this beauty, jealously tended by Pompey who had been trained by Jennifer from boyhood for this single job, was as accepted a part of Riverridge, as changeless and as inseparable, in Lutie's mind, as the columns which upheld the house itself.

And all of it spoke of Jennifer. Lutie wanted to get away, to forget that she was in Jennifer's bad graces. She would go through the garden, acknowledging none of its beauty and fragrance. She'd go through the woods to where her mother was sure to be found sitting on the long wooden bench under the trees, watching the carpenters building her new home. There were always fascinating piles of sawdust there, pieces of wood with which to build doll houses, odd bits of stone and tile, bright nails and the smell of fresh new lumber. Perhaps she'd find her grandfather there, since he walked over nearly every morning, and he'd carry

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her back to Riverridge on his shoulder and make peace for her with Jennifer, who never could resist his coaxing.

On the other side of the garden fence there was a clearing where years ago the first Tremont had cut the trees back to give sun to a garden, many of whose roots and cuttings had been brought over by a neighbourly Rachel Donelson Jackson. Even the stumps of those trees were gone now and the crabgrass, buckberry, and briar vines were all that Pompey had to contend with. But the space was kept religiously cleared of shade, and it was a favourite playground for birds and squirrels who frolicked there in sunlight and moonlight.

A thrush sat there in the grass now, watching Lutie with bright, intense eyes. Lutie, shutting the gate carefully behind her, stared back at the bird. Its head was cocked at an inquiring angle, but it did not move. Lutie felt ecstasy go over her like a fine spray of rain. Perhaps there was a nest under the bright-eyed bird, a nest with eggs or even little open-mouthed birdlings. She must somehow convey to it that her passing in no way concerned nestlings. Speaking in soft, comforting tones Lutie crept almost imperceptibly forward, making every gesture as gentle and unfrightening as she could.

The bird's eyes followed her with feverish interest, its sleek red-brown head turning slowly until Lutie was close enough to touch it. At that moment it gave a lurching flop in Lutie's direction and stopped almost at her feet.

Lutie was suddenly shorn of her ecstasy and instead something sinister laid hold of her. The world had shrunk now to this small green open space. Overhead the bright sky pressed down and all around them. The tall dark trees of the forest leaned forward menacingly as if shutting her off from all aid. There was nothing living around her, nothing familiar, nothing except this bird with the lurching hop and these terrible, bright eyes. In a green and horrifying bubble they were caught—a frightened child, a troubled bird.

Lutie felt her legs fold beneath her into the prickly thick grass.

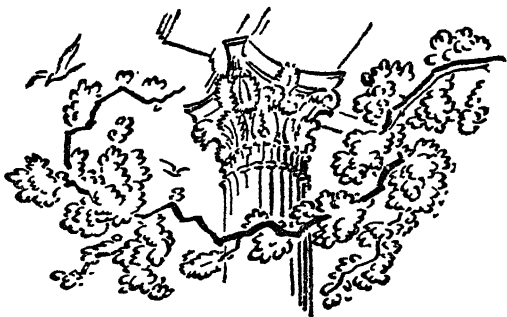
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Her eyes never left the eyes of the bird until, lost in the wonder of its unafraidness, she too became unafraid. She put out her hand and closed her fingers about the small, tremulous brown body, lifting it into her lap, settling her legs more comfortably in the grass. Its lightness astonished her. It weighed no more than one of its own brown feathers. How strange that this grown bird should weigh less than a fledgling picked up naked and gaping after a storm, less than a new-hatched chick, fluffy and peeping, less than anything Lutie had ever held in her hand before.

On its back near the tail feathers were two white capsules. Lutie, holding the bird tenderly, bent to take them off. Once her eyes had focused on their shape and size she saw hundreds of them under the feathers, deep in the bird's flesh. With incredible horror she turned the frail body slowly and looked underneath. Her very bones seemed cold as she saw that the thrush was a mere shell, that inside, like the stuffing in a baked hen, there was packed a mass of writhing, loathsome, gnawing maggots.

Even in her terror Lutie thought of the bird and its suffering. Resisting the impulse to throw it from her, she laid it gently on the grass and rubbed the sweating palms of her hands on her pink gingham pinafore. She sat there staring at the thrush, frozen with pity. Its uncomplaining patience clutched at her throat, her heart bled with feeling that vicious inward gnawing, at the bewilderment in the bright and gallant eyes. Her helplessness became intolerable, and at last, aching in every nerve, she rose awkwardly and moved toward the shadowed woods. She dared not look back to see if the bird were watching her, and filled with loathing at her cowardice, which made it impossible to kill the creature at once, she walked faster and faster, bent and stumbling like one who has had a long illness.

Once in the woods she was overcome by a nightmare of eyes and worms. Tripping on a root she fell and lay face downward, feeling herself crawling with filth, covered with shame and helpless to get rid of them. She buried her face in the wood's damp mulch, sobbing unrestrainedly.



CHAPTER FIVE

*J*UNE was a good month, thought John Tremont, as he strode along the narrow, shadowed road by the fields of Riverridge. May had been loveliest in his youth, but once he had seen crab-apple blooms leaning against charred walls and honeysuckle fawning at broken windows, that May in 1865, and since then he had been glad that the crab blossoms began to fade almost as soon as they reached perfection, for when they bloomed he saw again the vision of that mad, nightmarish twilight. But not even grief had quite killed the delight of the honeysuckle's heavy sweetness, that nostalgic fragrance which filled the summer nights with inescapable perfume.

In May the world was moist and green; by June the first drouth might catch them, the sun begin to burn, and by the end of the month the heat could become unendurable. But the corn throve in the heat, wave upon wave of sturdy, glossy green, moving and whispering under the blazing sky. The tobacco grew tall and katydid green, a bright contrast to the little blacks who moved among it like doodlebugs, picking off worms and the weakening offshoots. There had been a time when he had hoped to make Riverridge a big tobacco centre, when he dreamed of buying up land for miles around and planting this delicate and temperamental weed and of making millions. For several years he had gone up to Kentucky and over to Virginia to attend the tobacco

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markets and once or twice he had harvested and marketed crops of his own. But somehow the secret of big yield had always escaped him. There was invariably some slight flaw or imperfection in his crop which was not in another, and he soon realized that because of climate or seasons or his own ineptness he would never be a tobacco king. His tobacco usually sold with the second-best and he came home having spent his small profit on a horse or some gewgaw for Jennifer. So he had given up trying to raise tobacco for trade and planted only what he needed for his own and the servants' enjoyment. He still delighted in the field of soft green and in the fragrance of the blossoms on the plants he let go to seed. He watched every phase of the curing and drying, but tobacco was definitely a hobby with him now.

Eastward, the fields stretched to the river, sloping just enough so that a man, standing in this road, could see them all. The corn was thick and stout, about as tall as Lutie, and shimmered in the slight breeze. Tremont stopped and leaned on the fence, pushed his broad hat back, and looked contentedly out over his land. This business of farming had never become so habitual with him that he had lost his delight in the changing beauty of the earth. It was a family trait, this sense of wonder, this ability to be charmed, which he had passed on to Jonah and to little Lutie.

Along the river's edge, where he could see it from his office and from the windows of all the back rooms, lay the bluff, the ridge which gave the place its name. He seldom went up on it now, for once it had been his Gethsemane. Only this way, by shutting his eyes to memories like this, had he been able those first terrible years after the war, to maintain the calm and tolerance which were now habitually his. To his left northward the big white house sat on its slight knoll. The pillars gleamed among the trees, lovely and familiar, as much a part of him as the bones of his own hand. The fields rushed up around it like waves around a little island, rough and green and alive.

He tilted his hat forward against the blinding sun and watched a man ploughing in a lower field, a tiny crawling figure subduing

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the earth. Two liver-spotted hounds who had been foraging in the woods came back and stopped by him, panting and grinning with foolish doggy ecstasy. The bitch lay down in the cool, clay road, lolling her tongue and grinning ingratiatingly at him. Their presence made him aware of the sweet breath of the woods behind him, of the sun on hickory and pine and sassafras, and of the sound of hammering farther to the south—the carpenters working on Lucile and Ran's house.

A house was a strange and significant thing, he thought; it took on, or rather into it, the very spirit of the people who lived there. The minute you stepped into a house you could tell whether the people who had inhabited it had been happy. There were some houses that filled you with dread, as though the walls and rafters had been steeped in blood and hate; and there were others which let you know that here had been sorrow, perhaps—for what house lives long without it?—but graciousness and welcome always.

He felt that Riverridge was like that. His mother had died there, killed by the war as surely as if the shot which had pierced his father's heart had also pierced her own. She had already been dead and buried some little time when, after weeks of walking, he had reached home in the May twilight, buoyed through incredible suffering by the anticipation of her welcome. The air had been so sweet with crab and honeysuckle that he had not smelled the acrid odour of charred wood until he had stood incredulous and horrified under the oaks before the house and forced himself to admit that the dark windows were paneless, the lovely door hanging on its hinges. Only the rose glass round it had been spared, as if even enemy eyes had seen that it was too beautiful to break. He had gone up the steps where his every footfall had sounded in the terrible stillness like clods of earth on a coffin, and for an unaccountable time had stood in the ravished hall where his ancestors' painted faces hung in ludicrous strips and the empty rooms echoed back his hoarse shouting with mockery that became insupportable.

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He had turned and come away, his heart too bruised, his mind too weary to take it all in, hoping against hope that it was a dream, a nightmare born of homesickness, and that presently he would wake in the woods and begin his trek again. Then he had walked around the house and had seen the Negroes' quarters, all burned except one cabin. From it shone a narrow blade of light, and when he called, his voice weak with grief and terror, lost in the faint cries of the insects, Old Pompey, father of the one who tended Jennifer's gardens, had come into the yard and, weeping, had with shaking hands led him inside. There in the hazy smoke of the cabin fire, with tears running down his cheeks, the old darky had told John of his mother's death and burial, of the slaves' attempts to keep the place going, of the night on which the soldiers had come and 'freed' the Negroes and mutilated the house.

John had sat stonily while the old darky wept and mumbled, and then, refusing the corn pone and well water the old man had offered him, had gone out into the dark.

Up on the bluff—where he had fled with some mad idea of throwing himself off—he lay down, clinging to the earth and weeping like a mournful child. Then his tears had been spent and he lay still again; a dreadful cold calm came upon him, a hatred that seeped into him like a freezing rain and drowned all gentler feelings. Revenge, hate, fury—these were the armour in which he would gird himself! He would be ruthless and hard from this day forth. He lay there stroking his hatred as though it were a live serpent he had taken to nourish, and when daylight came he rose and went down the bluff's slope, walked through the yard and the gardens, never glancing at the house, whose hanging shutters had banged unheeded through the spring storms, down the long, winding drive and out into the road, meaning never to set foot on Riverridge again.

It was there that the chaplain who had been with his father's company had found him, staggering dazedly from side to side, muttering and flushed with fever. He had lifted the thin young

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man into his buggy and taken him to his own house. There he had nursed him carefully through pneumonia, delirium, and prolonged fatigue. Afterwards, on the pretext of needing a secretary, he had taken John to England, and it had been the chaplain himself, later to be Bishop of Tennessee, who had married John and Jennifer in Cornwall.

The future bishop had a penetrating brown eye, a persuasive tongue, a good mind and a heart of gold. It was he, on the long voyage across the ocean, who had made clear to John that hatred is corrosive and does more harm to the hater than the hated. Of Northern birth and heritage himself, he pointed out the ridiculousness of classing all men above a certain geographic area as devils. Humorous and eloquent, he drew John out of himself and by tact, and with the eager co-operation of Jennifer, built for him the philosophy by which, all these rich and fruitful years, John had lived so contentedly.

Perhaps it was because Jennifer was English, so that they could not, as all their friends did, live in a mutual past; perhaps it was because she was older and consciously cultivated a youthful outlook; perhaps it was because he could not dare risk arousing the feeling that had swept through him that night on the bluff—but whatever it was, John knew that he differed from his neighbours in that he sat less over old embers, trying to revive old flames of hate, looking backward trying to blame all the weakness and shortcomings of the future on past tragedies. He listened when others talked, he sometimes told an incident to bring a narrative together for someone else. But the tales he told Jonah were always tales of valour, or humour, or of local interest, never of revenge or hate. Without doubt, Jennifer's money, which had smoothed the way of his own personal reconstruction, had made possible a less bitter point of view. But he liked to think that it was something deeper than that, something more manly which had enabled him to put defeat and grief behind him, and, beginning with himself, to build for the future. This philosophy had saved his reason, and, he felt now, preserved the sweetness of the body

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of the house itself. To him the house was a living thing, a part of his family, different only in that it lived on, while the human members died and were replaced.

He wondered how long it would take Lucile's house to take on an atmosphere of spiritual dignity and charm. It never would, he thought, a little ashamed, for there was nothing spiritual about Ransome Parks and his charm was too unsubtle to become imbued in the fibres of a home. Lucile's own gentleness would be smothered by her husband's crass vitality, and no doubt by the time he got his house completed he would make another pile of money in one of his crazy schemes—he'd made this in 'gasoline buggies'—and build another more ostentatious one, in a more stylish neighbourhood.

Tremont moved away from the rail fence, and the bitch hound lifted her heavy body and ran ahead of him.

Leaving the road he cut through the woods, and the dogs were almost instantly lost in the underbrush. He could hear them thrashing about and yelping as they scared up rabbits and chipmunks.

He hadn't been over to see Lucile's house now in several days and he knew that it gave her pleasure to show him over it. He loved this daughter deeply. She had none of her mother's spirit and decisiveness, none of his own delight in life around him, only a sort of intense gentleness and maternalism. She was inclined to be moody, and her reticence, of which Jennifer was so impatient, suffered, he knew, at the hands of Ransome Parks.

Ran was all right, a good enough fellow, thought Tremont, but thick-skinned. Jennifer liked him and the Lord knew he had been considerate enough of her always, paying her more attention than he'd paid Lucile since the death of their little boy. He was a robust man, and Lucile's continuous grieving must have irked him. Jennifer's brusque cheerfulness had been more to his liking; but Tremont, who grieved for his own son, Jonah's father, felt an especial tenderness for Lucile.

The sound of the building was deafening now and almost

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drowned out the voices of the two women, but just as the outline of the house itself caught his eye, he heard them and stopped as abruptly as a pointer.

He could see Lucile, dressed in some light garment which concealed her figure, sitting on the bench. She had a fluff of pink wool in her hand and was knitting rapidly. He moved cautiously to see who her visitor might be, for he felt a sudden aversion to being drawn into polite platitudes when the earth with its incessant beauty was already speaking to him so clearly.

Just as he had thought—it was Mrs. Luther Perry. Her buggy stood in the newly cut road before the house and the horse tugged and nibbled at the sassafras bushes. Virginia Perry was a short, stocky woman of quick temper but invincible good-humour. She was mannish and frank, a great horsewoman, a charitable neighbour, and a fearless individual. She smoked and on occasion could swear like a trooper, but one had only to look into her honest grey eyes and feel that here was a woman upon whom one might call in any emergency and be sure of sympathy and practical help. She and Lucile were discussing a catalogue which Mrs. Perry held in a weather-browned hand.

‘That’s the bedroom suite,’ said Lucile. ‘How do you like it?’

Mrs. Perry stared at it from under her tilted cavalryman’s hat and answered: ‘Well, it’s a little fancy for me. I can’t picture Luther and me sleepin’ surrounded by all those swans or whatever they are, but if Ran likes it I reckon it’s all right. I’m glad to see you got a double bed and not low. Nobody can nurse a person in a low bed—plays heck with your back.’

‘We’re storing all the old stuff at Riverridge,’ said Lucile, bending over her knitting to pick up a stitch. ‘Ran wants everything new for this house.’

‘Wants to say he bought it and gave it to you,’ said Mrs. Perry dryly. ‘Well, that’s not a bad attitude. Better’n spongin’ on John and Jennifer the way some sons-in-law might do. That’s not a bad-lookin’ bed—more I look at it. Sally Bessemer—you know the Bessemer, come from Donelson—her mother was a

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Tate from Georgia—no kin to the Tennessee Tates—well, Sally, she's just bought a bedroom suite. I was by there last Monday. Got twin beds. She says there's nothin' new about 'em. Came from an old farmhouse in Connecticut. I told her those Yankees were a cold and bafflin' race. I don't see any need to imitate 'em 'specially in a thing like that. There's folk'll tell you it don't make any difference, but they're folks that don't have any of the finer feelin's. In a double bed two people can be close and kind and lovin' in a hundred different ways, but when a man 'has to get into a woman's bed, it's for only one thing. Gets so he don't pay any attention to you, 'less he wants somethin'.'

From where he stood Tremont could see the colour creep up Lucile's throat and cheeks. He turned and slipped away, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He didn't want to be caught at his eavesdropping. It would be just like Virginia Perry to ask him if she wasn't right. He walked on, tearing off a sassafras leaf and chewing on it, trying to picture the choleric Luther Perry as 'close and kind and lovin'.' He thought of the tribe of wild and attractive children these two had spawned, children whose strange brilliance coupled with an utter lack of discipline had got them nowhere except to the balls and hunts, the dining-rooms and parlours of the best Southern families. Their escapades were local history and their charm a national legend. He thought of the Perrys' youngest child, who had been babied into worthlessness and was now an affable drunkard and his mother's blind delight. On the occasion of his birth Mrs. Perry had demanded that her doctor, a hardshell countryman who believed that to give chloroform at childbirth was pampering an already pampered sex, should give her an anæsthetic. 'I'll never have another,' she had said decidedly, 'and I mean to have the advantage of modern science with this one.'

She had purchased the chloroform herself and stationed her personal maid—an ancient Negress who adored her—beside the bed, with a shotgun.

'When I say "chloroform,"' she had instructed the woman in

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the doctor's presence, 'you aim that gun at him, and if I don't get it, you shoot.'

Old Harriet, with utter devotion, had answered firmly, 'Yes, ma'am!'

The story went that whenever Virginia moaned, the gun went up and the harassed old doctor administered the anæsthetic. It had nearly killed Virginia, but she swore that it was not only worth it as relief from pain, but because she had set a precedent that any woman of any backbone could follow.

Tremont, walking through the deep woods, chuckled, remembering the horrified chatter among Jennifer's female friends when the story got out.

He thought he knew every flower that grew in the wood between his house and the acres he had given to Lucile as a wedding dowry. What then could be the low-spreading pink thing he glimpsed through the undergrowth? He quickened his step when he saw the bitch hound stop and sniff at it and give a conversational whine.

Lutie! Lutie lying prone and sobbing bitterly. A dozen fears assailed him and tore at his suddenly still heart as he saw her. He ran, cursing the slippery dry leaves underfoot which hampered his swiftness. Stooping, he picked her up, a limp and sodden little bundle of woe, and held her to him. Her warm, wet cheek buried against his neck and her arms went about him, trembling and clinging.

'Lutie! Lutie, *darling*! What's the matter? What hurt you? What frightened you so?' His wrath flared at whatever might have frightened her and he shook her angrily, crying, 'Tell me! Tell Grandad at once!'

'Th-th-bird!' gulped Lutie, leaning back to look at him with drowned and swollen eyes. 'The bi-bird by the garden!'

He looked at her, puzzled. Bird? Could a buzzard have swooped at her? They were nasty belligerent things.

He sat down with her between his knees and took out one of his enormous linen handkerchiefs. He held her and gently wiped

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her face, her hands, all covered with the black woods-mould. He brushed her hair back from her damp forehead and kissed her while she hiccoughed and shook, and her lips trembled uncontrollably.

'There, there! Why, I'm surprised at Grandad's girl crying about a bird! Look! The bird's gone. It won't bother Lutie any more!'

If he had expected this to comfort, he was mistaken. She leaned against him and cried the more bitterly, putting her hands before her face and saying, 'Oh, oh, oh!' in a tone of such despair that he was frightened.

'Here!' he said brusquely. 'I'll take you to your mother. I never saw such a baby! You can't even tell me what scared you. It must have been a dream. Did you go to sleep in the garden?'

'No! No!' She took her hands down and looked at him so pitifully that he felt his own lids tingle with sympathy. 'Oh, Grandy, it was a— a little bird. It was—it was *alive* and it was full of worms!'

The look of utter horror that filled her childish face, swollen and flushed as it was, made him love her from the bottom of his heart. He remembered suddenly worms he had seen—worms eating the face of a beautiful blond boy who lay dead in the woods after a skirmish—worms in bodies too hastily buried and heaved up by a late frost—worms always waiting for the time when any living thing should stop, to pounce and gnaw and horrify. He drew her to him and held her close. There are no words to soften death when it has been beheld in such a light. All one can do is understand.

She quieted then, feeling his sympathy pour into her as clearly as she felt his arms hard about her, his cheek rough and adoring, next to her own.

'There's a girl!' he said after a time, 'Grandad's brave girl—here in the woods all by herself. Shall I send Pompey to put the poor bird to sleep and bury it? And then shall we go and get

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Grandmother to let us wash in her room and maybe lie down awhile?’

Bathing at Jennifer’s washstand with its rose-patterned bowl and pitcher was an especial treat, for there were the softest of towels and lavender soap, and afterwards one was allowed to select a bottle of the old lady’s collection of rare and favourite perfumes to rub on the palms of the hands.

Thinking of the bird she had held a short while ago, of the fact that the maggots had been on her own skin, this seemed to Lutie now the most heavenly experience which could come to any child. But she hung her head and said, ‘She’s mad at me.’

‘What have you done now?’ asked Tremont, getting to his feet and taking Lutie’s grubby little hand in his own.

‘I got mad at my cup towel and I said damn,’ she answered, and looked up in time to catch the laughter wrinkles at his lips. She gave a little skip, feeling light and filled with happiness again, as though the tears had washed something hard and sharp away; and yet the memory of that sharpness lingered just enough to make the new comfort doubly good.

At the edge of the woods, in the clearing, she suddenly tightened her hold on him and said in a sharp, small voice, ‘Look out—you might step on it!’

But though they looked carefully, the bird was gone, and Tremont said at last, ‘I guess Pompey has already found it and now it is quite dead and out of its pain and misery. Is that all right with you, Lutie?’

She nodded, her eyes blurred again with tears, but he saw her pucker her chin firmly as if to keep it from trembling, and he led her briskly through the white gate. They stopped to pick a sprig of lemon verbena, which he thrust into a buttonhole in his white shirt, and a leaf of rose geranium for Lutie’s hair. At the snapdragons he broke off two blossoms and holding a yellow one under her chin said—as he had a hundred times before—‘You love butter?’ She lifted her head and squinted laughingly at him and he thrust a red one where it threw a glow on the soft, rounded flesh.

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'And strawberries, too! What a pig! Know what I love?'

She nodded, dimpling.

'Uh, huh—*me!*'

He laughed, and swung her up for a kiss, and they went out through the far gate, across the lawn where the shadows were creeping closer to the bases of the trees, under the heavy sweetness of the mimosas and up the wide steps.

Jennifer was still reading in bed when they entered her room and Sibby was laying out the clothes in which she would be dressed for noonday dinner. She looked up quickly, her mind still on the book, and Lutie, hanging back, eyed her speculatively. But Tremont's gaze was secretive and imperative.

'*Laissez la tranquille!*' he said firmly. '*Elle a eu une expérience tragique!*'

To Lutie he said, 'Apologize to your grandmother and get yourself washed.'

Lutie climbed up on the huge bed and pouted her lips against the white, powdery cheek.

'I'm sorry I said damn,' she said distinctly. 'Do I have to finish my hem?'

'Not today,' said Jennifer, sending a look of reproach at Tremont—he and his French!—his accent was awful—he was probably making the whole thing up to get this tom-boy out of a simple duty. But he was washing his own hands at the basin, humming, 'Oh, Susannah!' as he lathered his face and wiped it clean and shining with the towel.

'You next,' he said to Lutie, and Sibby came to refill the basin. In Sibby's dark hands the tall pitcher, with its longish spout like a pouting underlip and the pink roses splashed against its sides, rose in the air above Lutie's bent head. The water gushed forth and fell musically into the basin, rising in a pale greenish wave against the sides of the creamy bowl.

Lutie thrust her arms in and sighed as the cool water met the soft, warm flesh of her elbows. Sibby wet a cloth and lathered the fragrant lavender soap.

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'Hol' up yore haid,' she commanded gently and, squinting against the soap in her eyes, Lutie raised her pink and smudgy face. Round and round the washcloth went into her ears and out again, down her hot neck, under the tangled hair and beneath the chin where the snapdragon had glowed. Then the rinse—oh, to prolong this coolness, this soothing administration!—and at last the soft patting with the towel and a flick of bath powder at her throat.

'Come; lemme bresh dat hair, an' you'll look mo' lak a li'l lady,' said Sibby, taking the heavy silver brush in her hand.

Tremont was telling Jennifer of his walk. He invariably came in each morning and recited every detail he could remember, so that her knowledge of the estate's progress was almost as accurate as his. He was amused to see that this morning she was interested in nothing he had to tell her, although she was making a polite attempt to appear so. She was eaten up with curiosity to know what the *expérience tragique* had been. To tease her he drew out the description of the fields and made up a long rigmarole about Lucile's house, and when Lutie moved restlessly after waiting patiently for some minutes at the side of the bed, he said, 'Oh, here's a little lady who wants some sweetness added to her.'

'No doubt she needs it,' sniffed Jennifer, baffled by she knew not what, but sure that Tremont was up to some trick. 'Well—open the drawer, child, and make your choice. Only don't be long—I want Sibby to dress me.'

Lutie moved over to the tiny Chinese chest which stood on a table against the wall near the head of Jennifer's bed and, with the air of a child who expects to release a Genie, cautiously pulled out one of the delicate, inlaid drawers.

There they were, as incredibly beautiful and enchanting as ever, rows and rows of tiny crystal vials, pale lavender, transparent rose, or clear glass, some with gold stoppers, some carved, a few of black china, one jade—and each holding an exquisite scent.

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Tremont and Jennifer watched her, amused at her absorbed delight. For a long moment she stood with her hands clasped and looked at the flasks and then she put her finger on a minute cut-glass stopper and looked up inquiringly at her grandmother.

Jennifer nodded and held out a gnarled hand. Lutie lifted the bottle carefully from the drawer and handed it to her. Jennifer, removing the stopper with some difficulty, drew the glass stem across each of Lutie's outstretched palms, moved it back and forth before her own nose two or three times, and, smiling at her grandchild, handed the bottle back to her.

Tremont, who had watched this familiar ceremony with pleasure, rose now, and bent to kiss Jennifer.

'I reckon we'd better get out now, Lutie,' he said, 'and let Grandmother dress. What do you say?' he prompted.

Lutie, turning at the door, with her hand in his, said happily, 'Thank you, Grandmother!'

Tremont, knowing that Jennifer's curiosity was gnawing her, winked and went out, closing the door behind him.

The look of exasperated amusement with which she so often gazed after him came into Jennifer's face.

'Tragedy!' she sniffed. 'Humph! Conspiracy! That's what it is! He spoils that child to death!'

'Yes'm,' agreed Sibby, coming to the bedside with Jennifer's clothes, 'he sho do. But Mistuh John, he jes' cain't beah ter see nobuddy onhappy.'

She bent above her mistress tenderly, and they began the tedious and painful ceremony of getting Jennifer dressed.



CHAPTER SIX

JONAH could not remember when he had not wanted to write. Even before he could spell or make all his letters, the fact that he could transfer thoughts, sights ('I see the cat'), smells, and sounds on to paper, to look at, at any time and any number of times, delighted him.

As a small boy he wrote copiously, even in those days when he was still able to run free and be outdoors a great deal. He wrote tales about his heroes, Siegfried, Robin Hood, Hiawatha—re-writing the versions he read in his books, making poems of the prose and prose of the poems. Later he wrote about his own people, for they were as mythical as these others, and he saw them in the bright sparks of the log fire on the white marble hearth, as men sat and talked in tones of excitement, admiration, or fury. He pictured them—Lee and Jackson, Forrest and Morgan—riding the heaped-up golden clouds of the sunset or haunting the honeysuckle-sweet shadows of the dusk about Riverridge. They were heroes, not of this earth—giants.

It was not until he was in high school that he realized that writing drawn from one's own environment is good. He bought himself a lot of narrow little notebooks, revelling in the smooth, unsullied blankness of their pages. He labelled them '*Sound*' (writing the words on the smooth brown paper cover in the plain

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and beautiful lettering which he used in all his writing), 'Sight,' 'Smell,' 'Taste,' 'Feel,' and the last one, 'Thought.'

At the end of three or four weeks 'Sight' was running over and 'Smell' was nearly full, while 'Thought' was so near empty that he blushed to look at it. After that he bought another notebook and simply jotted down things that came to him, mostly in scenes or little pictures, and later he transferred some of these to the proper booklets.

Life took on a new brilliance for him, though he had always had his grandfather's appreciation of the world about him. The sight of a tree with silver leaves turning in a wind; of a cloud of young peach trees all in bloom against the rim of a hill; the sun on the brown ripples of the river; Chloe's face, seen gleaming with sweat in the spotlight of the open 'eye' of the stove; his grandmother's hands and the way she had of lowering her heavy lids before she made a judicious remark; the colour of the broom fields, reddish in the afternoon sun, pale under the white moon; the sound and smell of rain in a dusty road under the blooming locust trees; a black man's singing voice edged with sorrow as a storm cloud is edged with blinding light; the smell of ferns and hickory leaves, or damp places and the attic smell of old houses; the glory of the turning woods; the hush of snow; Riverridge in the stillness of a moonlight night, and his grandfather's figure bent above a book with the lamplight on his thin brown cheek. These and countless other things, Jonah put into his notebooks, fitting words together to make these pictures right, taking a phrase out, polishing it, putting it back—working, working, working, and feeling at the end so light and full of well-being that often it was a shock to him to find how long he had been at it. He would realize that he had forgotten for hours on end the pain and inconvenience of his leg.

He grew more and more absorbed by writing as he grew older, and more insatiable to know what was behind the things he saw and felt. He stared at fellow travellers on streetcars or trains with an intensity which was often disconcerting. Only the earnestness

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of his sensitive young face prevented many a subject of Jonah's speculations from bashing him on the nose.

He found life so entertaining that he was often quiet for long periods, absorbing the sensations about him. He had already earned a reputation for indifference and awkwardness among most of his more lively friends, who laid his quietness to timidity and self-consciousness about his lameness.

No one paid the slightest attention to his 'scribbling' except Jennifer. By all the other members of the family it was assumed that Jonah had to have something to do since his activities had been so cruelly curtailed. But Jennifer, who loved a good phrase as some men love wine, was proud of the boy and encouraged him to bring his writing to her and allow her to read it. He would never read it aloud or let her read it in his presence, but he would come back in a day or so for her criticism, of which there was often a-plenty.

They would start out with Jonah listening humbly and agreeing, sounding grateful and flattered at her interest, until suddenly she would come to some expression he had considered extra fine and she would say, 'That's terrible!' Or, 'Whatever are you trying to say here?' and the battle would be on. Jonah, forgetting Jennifer's age or his relationship to her, would spring up and begin to shout. He would ask her to do better if she could, he would swear he had read it in a dozen places, 'just that way.' 'Oh, it's more trite than I thought,' she would answer coldly, and he would beat on his knee with indignation.

She adored these bouts and to him they were like a life-giving transfusion. They filled him with new ideas, new words, new determination to make her admire him. They usually ended with grudging laughter on his part and delighted victory on hers, and always resulted in a storm of writing in the little room on the third floor where, removed from prying eyes and distracting sounds, he sometimes wrote all through the night.

When Isabel had come to Riverridge, Jonah had devoured her with his usual eager interest and a few nights later gone to put

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her down on paper. But she had baffled him completely. His descriptions of her read either as if she were a hussy or a paper doll, and he tore up sheet after sheet of foolscap in black despair. This was almost the first writing, too, that he had not shown to Jennifer, and he knew that no matter how he struggled with it he would never ask her advice on it; nor that if, as seemed unlikely, it turned out to be the best he had ever done, would he show it to her. He writhed at the thought of anyone knowing that he was remotely interested in the way the smooth hair grew back from Isabel's pale forehead or that every time she lifted her long lids the deep blue of her eyes under the heavy black brows was a shock to him. Having long since, under Jennifer's tutelage, determined to be a realist, he wrote of her harsh voice and apparent stupidity and tried to get on to paper what it was about her that so persistently attracted him. But she evaded him here as much as she evaded his analysis when he was actually with her; and because he could not bring her into being in the one satisfactory medium of his life, he began to resent her thoroughly, yet at the same time he was further attracted to her.

The days fell into a pattern for Isabel, not the pattern she had imagined when she had first been told that she was to be shipped South to be the companion to an elderly, ill, and probably irascible old woman. Not quite the pattern she had hoped for when she had first come to Riverridge and been received with such graciousness and warmth. It fell between the two and was composed of long, sunny weeks made up with simple, unexciting incidents, a sense of security and peace such as she had never known, lighted by the possibility of more exciting things to come. She liked the feeling of order, the ritualistic care of the house, and the sense of established substantiality that went with this way of life.

In Jennifer's room each morning she heard the household affairs discussed. She was sent on errands to library and linen closet, to garden and attic. She began to be acutely aware of the

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material richness and comfort of the place and to be more than ever determined to entrench herself here.

She was standing on a stool in the upstairs linen closet one morning when Evan came through the hall and saw her there. She was putting away a pile of sheets which she had marked for Jennifer, and as she laid them on the shelf and dropped her arms he came close and clasped her around the waist. Surprised, she clutched him at the shoulders, and he reached up, pulled her head down and kissed her full on her open mouth. She jerked away, lost her footing and fell into his arms. He kissed her again, then, thoroughly and with an expertness that burned through her own inexperience and made her know that he was doing it in a calculating, investigating way to see how she would respond. For a moment she was tempted to yield to the new turbulence which swept through her, to put into a return kiss all the sudden flaring passion which surprised her as much as it would have surprised him. But her practised caution saved her. She thrust him away from her, roughly, and turning, flew into her room, slamming and locking the door behind her.

He stood staring after her, flushed and tumbled from her struggle, then, laughing, he straightened his hair and tie and ran humming down the stairs. But all that day there stayed with him the feel of her firm young waist in its crisp summer frock, the sweetness of her breath, the surprised widening of the deep blue eyes at those exploring kisses which had roused her to flight.

In her room Isabel had taken refuge on the wide bed, holding her hands to her flaming cheeks, trying in vain to still her thoughts. Evan had been so extremely casual up till now. True, the few glances he had given her had been gay and sometimes taunting; they had stirred her as Jonah's earnest looks had never done, but she had tried to shut them from her mind since Jonah was the one for whom she planned to spread her net. Jonah was the one who would inherit Riverridge, she felt certain. He was the one to carry on the family name.

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She squirmed in ecstatic excitement, remembering the feel of Evan's arms, steady and possessive, behind her tilted head, the slow and sensuous pressure of his laughing mouth. She was indignant at his thinking she would be flattered by his attentions—the sort he might give to any nice Irish housemaid—and was flattered by them in spite of herself. She lay there, living the moment over and over, adding other imagined meetings of the same sort until at last, exhausted by her own fancies, she rose and went slowly to the washstand and poured out the water to bathe her tell-tale face.

In spite of a pretended disinterest in Lucile's house—she would have preferred to keep them all under her matriarchal roof—Jennifer could not conceal the enjoyment engendered by all the bustle and excitement of building and furnishing. Lucile, knowing that Jennifer could not bear to be left out of anything, brought samples of wallpaper and velvet, satin and lace, to River-ridge and asked Jennifer to help her select colour schemes for her rooms. With her lap full of materials Jennifer's eyes would take on their old fire and she would sit for hours, holding one piece against another, turning the pages of current household magazines with her stiff hands, making pungent comments on what she considered modern folderol and fiddle-faddle. She really longed to see the house, and Ransome had promised her that the first day it was completely settled he would take her himself in the surrey and carry her from room to room.

Jennifer was planning a sort of coming-out party for Isabel. This entailed as much or more discussion than Lucile's house, for there were so many conflicts to consider. The party must be given after a minimum period of mourning for Isabel's father. (Since nobody in the community knew him or of his death, Jennifer was willing to wink an eye at this formality and soothe her conscience by adding that it must be given before Lucile's baby came in October.)

Mrs. Luther Perry dropped in on Jennifer one afternoon in

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mid-July, and found her at her desk in the bedroom almost immersed in notepaper.

'Makin' your will?' asked Virginia Perry, seating herself uninvited and taking out her cigarettes.

'Just as soon be,' answered Jennifer, wheeling her chair away from the desk and smiling at her old friend. 'I'm going to give Isabel a party—want her to meet some eligible young men——'

'Name one,' said Virginia. 'Nothin' but culls in the whole crop. Never saw anything like it. Prettiest girls—year after year—graceful, intelligent, lovely to look at—and what do they have to marry? 'Bout once in a blue moon some worth-while boy with brains *and* looks comes along, and there's such a mad rush to get him he usually hooks up with some blushin' violet, just to get away from the clamour.'

'We're getting weak as a people,' said Jennifer, not making it clear whether she meant the white race or whether for a moment she had forgotten that she was not American. 'The time'll come when the women will run this universe. I'm glad I'll be dead by then!' she added, and laughed without humour.

'Who have you asked?' inquired Virginia. 'The MacQuiddies, I suppose—there are two fairly nice young blades. Red-headed and freckled, but the sort that would wear well, like good tweed. What about the Downs—'course you have to have two girls if you ask Freddy——'

'Freddy!' Jennifer made a *moue* and shook her head. 'However, he does for a dance partner. I'm going to clear out the downstairs, wax all the floors, and have an orchestra from town,' she added irrelevantly, and her eyes had the pleasurable light of a young girl's. Virginia Perry felt a wave of admiration and pity sweep over her, looking into that indomitable face.

'D'you think Wardie would come?' asked Jennifer, wheeling back to the desk and picking up a pencil and her lists. 'Girls always like an older man or two—sort of puts the youngsters on their mettle.'

'He'll come if he's sober,' said Wardie's mother—it was

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Wardie who had been the principle of the shotgun birth. 'I'll shut him in the office the day before and try to get him here walkin' upright—but I can't guarantee he'll last the evenin' out.'

'Wardie's always delightful—even in his cups,' said Jennifer. 'He'll like Isabel—the girl's really a beauty. But I can't make her out,' she added, dropping her hands in her lap. 'She's not bold, but she's not shy. She's as ignorant as they come at seventeen—I mean about everything; but she has poise and she's so pretty no man on earth will ever stop to find out whether she's got sense or not. At least not until after he's married her, and then she'll probably satisfy him so well other ways it won't make much difference.'

'Yeah, Wardie'll like her,' said his mother grimly.

Jennifer laughed.

'I shouldn't talk about the girl that way. She's really been very sweet to me and I must say she's tried hard to learn. She wants to do everything she can to "pay her way" as she says—she'd take over the whole care of the house if I'd let her. You see she's always lived around in boarding-houses or hotels, poor child. This is the first real home she's ever had, and she does truly appreciate it.'

Virginia looked at the stub of her cigarette, threw it into the fireplace (Jennifer made a mental note to have Sibby remove it before it began to 'stink us out of house and home'), and lighted another. It seemed to her that the phrases Jennifer was using were too trite to be her friend's own. She could almost hear Isabel saying them, standing before Jennifer, with her fair head drooping, the long, knowing eyes hidden under the thick-lashed lids.

'I'm coming to the party, too,' she announced suddenly, and Jennifer, diverted, cried, 'Oh, of course! We can sit on the side and gossip. Jonah will be glad to hear it—he likes you tremendously.'

'I like him, too,' said Virginia, thinking of Jonah's sensitive dark face and wondering what he thought of this newcomer who was not shy, but 'ignorant and beautiful.'

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'How does he like Isabel?' she asked, getting up and giving her stays a hitch, before she pulled on her riding-gloves. 'And Evan? How do your own young men react to this bundle of beauty?'

'Oh, Jonah's much too young to be seriously interested in girls. He's only eighteen this next month. And Evan—he was nineteen this week—Evan's much more sophisticated, I suppose you'd call it, than Jonah, but I don't think either of them has so much as looked at her. She doesn't have much personality, and that's the truth. In fact, I don't know what she does have—but there's something—maybe it's just her colouring—those black eyebrows and that very fair hair——'

'I'll ask Wardie, after the party,' said Virginia, and she stooped to give Jennifer a kiss—a gesture so unusual for the brusque Virginia that Jennifer sat looking down the hall and out of the wide-thrown door for several minutes after she had gone.



CHAPTER SEVEN

THE last day before the dance practically everything downstairs except in Jennifer's own room and in Tremont's office, where he had slept since Jennifer's illness, was moved and scattered about the upstairs rooms and halls. The dining-room was kept intact, but in the parlours, library, and halls only enough chairs were left to accommodate wallflowers, chaperones, and the old men who would foregather to fight over the Civil War. A few tables for flowers and a sofa or two were pushed against the walls. The floors were given a final waxing, and a sort of uplifted frenzy took hold of the place which affected all but Jennifer—she felt like a clever general who sees the battle forming as he had planned—and Lucile, who had given up to utter weariness.

On the morning of the great affair, Sibby, climbing painfully up to the second floor, went into Lucile's room and found her still in bed, her eyes dark with fatigue, and a look of anxiety on her face.

'You doin' rat, honey, layin' hyere in de bed,' said the old woman, smoothing back Lucile's hair with a gentle hand, 'All dis jamification ain't doin' you no good. You ain't got long ter go an' you better be takin' keer o' yo'se'f.'

'Oh, Sibby,' cried Lucile, with distress, 'do you really think it will be soon? We can't move till next week and if this baby isn't born in the new house I'll never get over it!'

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'Res', den,' said Sibby shortly. 'Don't strain and trubble yo'se'f. We's got all de gals we needs ter dress de young ladies, an' do all de res' o' de t'ings. You lay here an' take it easy or dat baby'll be hyere too soon.'

She took one of the pillows from under Lucile's head and with a swift, deft movement slipped it under her knees.

'Dere,' she said softly, smoothing the sheets, 'dat'll tek de strain off yo' back. Let y'se'f down against it easy and jes' 'lax y'se'f.' She stroked the tangled hair and, going to the basin, dampened a cloth and wiped Lucile's flushed cheeks.

'It goner be a boy,' she said, chuckling softly. 'You totin' it high an' it sho' to be a boy. Don' you git up fum dere till just befo' de folks come. Fount done set you a little sofy by the stair rail whar you kin see all de folks and dey finery. Dere ain't no need o' you doin' nuffin' terday.'

Sibby it was whose hands had received Lucile from the doctor who attended her birth. Sibby had hushed her first plaintive cries. Her tone of authority was a familiar one, and Lucile, letting her aching back 'lax' against the pillows, was glad to obey. She loved being cuddled and scolded and allowed to rest. Most of all, the fear that her child might be born here—a superstitious feeling that only its birth in the new house would make an end to her old grief and frustration—reconciled her to being quiet.

'I'll bring you some coffee an' somepin' t' eat,' said Sibby, when she had brushed Lucile's hair and braided it with gentle, soothing tugs and thumps, and then she went softly from the room.

Less reconciled, but controlled by the desire to look their best that night, Dorothy and Isabel lay in their beds and tried to allay the feverish imaginings which assaulted both of them whenever they thought of the party. Jennifer had ordered exquisite dresses for them, their beaux had sent flowers—the youngest McQuiddy boy in Dorothy's case (and this was quite a concession on Lucile's part, for Dorothy was too young for formal affairs), and Jonah, Evan, and Ward Perry, in correspondingly increasing lavishness, had sent flowers to the dazed and rapturous Isabel.

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Down in her room, apparently undisturbed, but taking a vicarious pleasure in the clatter of preparedness around her, Jennifer sat perched among her gigantic pillows, reading the morning paper and munching a bunch of the first grapes from the Riverridge vines, which Tremont had brought to her.

The house was full of the last asters, huge dahlias, and the first chrysanthemums of the season, supplemented by the hothouse flowers sent by Jennifer's friends. Lunch was served on trays and supper was a snack with hot milk for Jennifer and the two girls. Grinning coloured girls flew from floor to floor to iron a ruffle or a ribbon, to carry flowers or trays, to peek at the party dresses laid out on the guest-room beds. Tremont, wandering amusedly through the house, thought that he had not seen such bustle and elegance since his own boyhood 'befo' de War,' and a sense of pride and well-being flooded him warmly.

Isabel felt the same richness, and every minute of that day hardened her resolution to make herself a permanent place here.

Dorothy was practically hysterical with excitement by the time she was dressed, but Isabel put on each garment, watched every strand of hair as it passed through Jinny's fingers, with controlled calculation.

Jennifer had dressed her in blue, not too unsophisticatedly—Jennifer who knew little of subtlety did know the allure in the emphasizing of a narrow waist, a well-turned breast, shoulders as white as haw. She had not long to live, she knew, and Isabel had become her responsibility. Men weren't very acute; they had to be shown, and every man present this night was to be shown Isabel Page at her best. Modesty combined with temptation had been her aim, and though she had, of course, breathed none of this to the girl, Isabel, staring at herself in the huge mirror in her room, drew a sharp small breath of admiration at her own reflection which was a tribute to Jennifer's cleverness.

Three lamps stood on the bureau and their light threw every detail into relief. Isabel's pale hair, washed and brushed to a honey-coloured gloss by Jinny, was parted in the middle and

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braided around her smooth head in startling contrast to the rather fusty style of the period. Gazing at herself, Isabel remembered her first afternoon there and Evan's amazed look as he had stared at her on the rose-covered balcony. She raised her head imperiously, thinking, *'I'm beautiful! He'll want to kiss me to-night, surely—but I won't let him. I'll let him love me—maybe he will never marry, maybe he'll pine for me always, but I'll never marry him. I'll never marry anybody who can't give me all this—a house, servants, this!'* she ended inadequately, unconsciously making a gesture with her hand to indicate the traditional beauty of Riverridge, so that Jinny, arranging the folds of her long skirt, looked up in surprise.

There was a pink whirlwind down the hall and Dorothy burst into the room crying, 'Come on, Isabel, we're late! Grand-mother's sent Lizzie May to fetch us, five minutes ago.'

For the next hour it seemed to Isabel that she shook a million hands, smiled a million smiles, heard a million voices say, 'So glad to meet you—heard so much of you from Jennifer—My dear, how charming!—what a lovely contrast you two girls make—just like two rosebuds!—My dear, what a lovely party!' Old men bent and kissed her hand and murmured pretty verses about stars and roses and the grand old flag. Young men stared with undisguised amazement and fell, emotionally, at her feet. Women's eyes, curious and appraising, met hers and eyes of girls her own age sought hers out as if to ask by what secrets she became so self-contained, so dazzling.

Once Evan caught her eye and winked, and she forgot for a moment her weariness at standing still so long, of smiling until her face ached and of trying to think of replies to murmur to the pleasant inanities which rushed over her like a small, warm and babbling stream.

At last, however, it was over. Jennifer dismissed the receiving line, the orchestra broke into an irresistible waltz, and the young people began to dance. It was all very informal and gay, with the older people chatting in groups and moving about, stopping to

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admire this young couple or that or to convey a message from some relative unable to come.

The place was teeming with 'relatives,' genuine and by 'courtesy,' and Isabel had thought that she had never known that so much 'kissin' kin' could be gathered together this side of the courts of Solomon.

The orchestra was stationed in the little back hall off Jennifer's room and Fount had been given implicit instructions not to allow them anything but lemonade or ginger ale until after the guests had left. The great chandeliers had been polished and were fully ablaze. Each tiny feather on the silver pheasants in the dining-room reflected a miniature of the fruit centrepiece down the middle of the table and of the gigantic silver punchbowl presided over by Cud'n Algie Yarbrough, who unfortunately had not been placed under the same restrictions as the orchestra. About ten o'clock he was led staggering off to the rear of the house while Cud'n Lily Alsup took over and rediluted the devil's brew which Cud'n Algie's incessant tasting and improving had concocted.

Jonah had promised to bring Lutie some bonbons and a piece of cake at ten, and when he came up the stairs, bearing them, he sat with Lucile and watched the crowd as it wove back and forth. They were dancing now, and Jonah was glad to take his dragging leg out of the way. Lutie ate her cake and sat licking her bonbons, reluctant to have them disappear, until Jonah picked her up and carried her to bed. She was dressed in her nightgown, long-sleeved, high ruffled neck, and square, tucked yoke, and he thought, as he stooped to kiss her lifted cheek just before he blew out the lamp, that he had never seen a child with so vivid and mobile a face, or one who always seemed to him very able to understand the moods of others.

'You goin' to sit with Mother?' she asked, kissing him stickily.

'Yes. We'll be right here in the hall. But you go to sleep. You need your sleep to grow on.'

'But you'll watch—and tell me tomorrow—*everything*?'

'Everything I see,' promised Jonah, and went from the room

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smiling, knowing that tomorrow she would question him as minutely as any judge.

He went back and sat by Lucile on the small sofa Jennifer had had put there for her. Almost at once he was lost in wondering how he would describe what he saw, how long he would remember it, and if he could ever hope to get the colour, the noise, the movement, the feeling of gaiety all together on paper if ever he should want to.

To Isabel, once the task of receiving was over, the night was one long round of gaiety and triumph. She loved the feeling of assurance which her own knowledge and the compliments of her partners gave her. She danced moderately well, without Dorothy's abandon or Evan's easy grace, but few men, holding her in their arms, being so close to the clear beauty of her skin and eyes and hair, would have cared whether she danced like an angel or an elephant. After two glasses of Cud'n Algie's punch—administered by Evan who slyly watched the result—she found no difficulty in talking, and Jennifer, watching from her sofa in the hall, nodded happily to see the girl so poised and at ease.

Ward Perry, having given her one long and ardent look on meeting her, the same look he gave to any woman on a like occasion, went out on the porch and took a deep breath of the innocent air which blew over Jennifer's rose garden, and reached into his vest pocket to bring out a clove, which he nibbled on sheepishly. A few moments later, he went in and claimed her for a dance and for the first time in his life wondered if he could keep sober long enough to make a good impression on someone. His mother had told him that Isabel was pretty, but that she was a beauty, and a cold, blonde beauty at that, she had failed to inform him. As he whirled her over the floor with his arms around the waist which Jennifer had appreciated, he realized that here, if anywhere in the world, was a woman for whom he could reform—at least temporarily. The long blue eyes under their black lashes, the demure softness of the sooty brows, the pale crown of braids, and the soft full lips as red as the roses whose petals were already

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falling in the summer heat, filled him with a madness which was more heady than liquor.

As for Isabel, not even Cud'n Algie's punch, or the intoxication of flattery and the most fun she had ever had in her life, could make her forget the prime purpose of the evening which, as both she and Jennifer had tacitly agreed, was to provide Isabel with a potential husband. Under the long lids each partner was carefully surveyed, and her own reactions to him coolly analysed. Only two left her bewildered and out of control—Evan, whose eyes, laughing down into hers, stirred her in a way she resented yet found delightful, whose nearness brought a disconcerting memory of the day he had kissed her, and whose lighthearted banter only made her yearn to hear from him some of the extravagant flattery which her other partners had expressed—and Ward Perry, whose suavity and poise held an especial charm for her, was more subtly flattering than anything the younger men said or did. Catching sight of herself and Ward in the long mirrors of the hall, Isabel thrilled at the picture they made, Ward dark and gracefully deferential, herself slim and blonde, matching him in poise and physical beauty. She wondered about his future, and whether he would have a place of his own; if the Perrys were wealthy or like so many of their neighbours, land-poor and living on the thin ice of family reputation. Her eyes, as she thought this, were abstract and remote, and he thought, amazed at his own emotion, that she was the most beautiful, innocent, and dreamy creature that he had ever held in his arms.

He had danced with her three times when they went out to the porch. The moon had risen clear and round, the colour of a ripe apricot. It turned the fields to silver and laid a ribbon of gold down the breast of the sluggish river.

Orange light streamed from the windows of the house and under the great trees the shadows, black and soft as soot, moved back and forth across the gay-coloured figures of the couples who strolled there. Laughter, music, and the sibilant sound of dancing

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feet floated out on the fresh, fennel-scented air, and drowned out the insistent shrillness of the insects.

There were other couples on the porch. Their voices floated about them like mist, and mingled with the night sounds and the music. But Ward and Isabel might have been in an empty world, in a soap-bubble upon whose convex film the other figures were reflected.

They stood near the back of the house and looked at the moonlight which sifted over the garden, the fields, and the river. Isabel was not unaware that she was lovely in this unearthly light, that its silvery cast on her fair hair, her dark unfathomable eyes and sloping shoulders, made her doubly desirable. She spoke in a low tone as though the scene before them really slept in the moonlight, 'Isn't it beautiful!' and Ward, who on any previous occasion would have made the obvious reply, murmured, 'Beautiful!' and laid his hand along the cool flesh of her inner arm.

He wished he dared kiss her. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her *hard*. He wanted to know the coolness and warmth of her lips and throat. His own face was burning as he thought of laying it against the softness of that perfect flesh. But drunk or sober there were bounds one did not exceed if one were a gentleman, and in the home of one's parents' closest friends.

He looked down into her eyes and laughed, trying to throw off his serious mood.

'You remind me of a name that country folks give to a certain flower,' he said, and she felt the hand on her arm tremble. 'Pretty-by-Night,' they call it—'Pretty-by-Night.'

She smiled and swayed towards him and suddenly the hand tightened.

'Pretty—by night!' he muttered, and turning, pulled her roughly towards the open French doors of the dining-room. His fingers bit into her arm until she winced, but she did not mind the pain. Inexperienced as she was, his manner told her that she had stirred him almost beyond control, and she was triumphant.

Disappointment was vivid in her face as a youth with furze on his upper lip came out to claim her effusively. She gave Ward a

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long, intimate look into which she hoped to put regret, promise, timidity, and allure.

Ward, for once without poise, turned and went in at the front door, looking for his father whom he knew would be surrounded by mint juleps. He found him in a small front parlour to the left of the big hall, a room Jennifer saved for entertaining the people she did not particularly like. It was formal and precise, with an elaborate chandelier, gilt chairs, and a white marble mantel—what she called her Louis Mistake room, one of the more foolish indulgences of her young womanhood.

It was littered now with trays of mangled *hors d'oeuvres*, empty glasses rapidly defrosting in the night's heat, sprigs of mint and the relaxed bodies of the older gentlemen of the party.

Ward strolled to the table where Fount had opportunely set a fresh tray, lifted a frosty glass to his lips and sipped gratefully. He grinned at Jonah, huddled on one end of a brocaded love-seat, and Jonah grinned back sleepily.

The room was blue with smoke and as stuffy as a closet, but Ward was too lost in thought to be aware of it. The cold, fragrant drink and the vision of Isabel, cool and provocative in the moonlight, blended into one satisfying sensation.

His father moved near and picked up a glass, shouting over his shoulder: 'Johnston never fought a single battle he won! Why, if Sherman hadn't——' he turned and his voice was lost in the clamour. Phrases whipped past Ward like thin branches flying in the wind—'he cut off the attack'—'he didn't fight Manassas'—'at Fair Oaks and Seven Pines'—'Yah! and he lost 'em, too, didn't he?'

Someone laughed and began to hum:

'I hates the Yankee Nation
And everything they do.
I hates the Declaration——'

Ward drained the last goodness of his drink and moved out into the hall. He didn't want to dance with anyone but Isabel. He didn't particularly want to *dance* with her. He only wanted to

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be near her, to touch her, to feed on her perfect and incredible beauty. He thought gloomily that she was years younger than he—she couldn't be more than seventeen or eighteen, and he was thirty-four. When she saw him by daylight, she'd probably scorn him openly. Morosely he leaned against the door-frame and watched.

Isabel was dancing with Evan again. His bright head was bent close to hers. He was talking in a low, teasing tone, and as they passed Ward, he saw that Isabel was staring straight ahead of her, her cheeks flushed and her eyes hard with exasperation. Evan winked at him over her shoulder and Ward felt his mouth jerk into a crooked grin, while he wished that he could snatch Evan's arms from around her and kick him from the room.

He had hoped for another chance to talk to her, but the orchestra broke into 'Home, Sweet Home,' the dancers began to disperse after a few strains, and there was that sudden rise in voices and movement which comes with gay farewells. Ward watched Isabel and Dorothy as they stood bidding their guests good night. Then he went to look for his mother.

They were the last to leave. Old Luther Perry, with his hat at an exaggerated angle, stood in the hall and sang, with flourishes,

— 'I hates the Constitution,
This great Republic, too:
I hates the Freedman's Buro
In uniform of blue:
I hates the nasty eagle
With all his brag and fuss,
And the lyin' thievin' Yankees,
I hates them wuss and wuss!'

'Come on, you old fool!' said Virginia affectionately. 'Kiss the girls good night.'

He kissed them both, and then Jennifer, leaving an impression of prickly stubble and mint and whiskey, and then with a final wave over his shoulder went down the steps between Virginia and Ward. Tremont chuckled affectionately and turned back into the house, humming the tune of 'The Old Rebel's Song.'

'It was a wonderful party!' said Isabel dreamily. Her eyes met

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Jennifer's and the look in them satisfied the old woman; for the moment she forgot the pain which now racked her.

'It's time for bed,' she said brusquely, and motioned to Tremont to bring her wheel chair.

Jonah, stiff and sleepy and filled with the atmosphere of the talk he had been hearing, watched hazily as the last carriage and spluttering automobile departed into the fading moonlight, then turned gratefully indoors where a staggeringly weary staff of good-humoured blacks swept up dead flowers and bits of rumpled ribbon, carried away dishes and gathered up napkins and glasses.

When they went up to bed, Evan paused at Jonah's door and said, 'Well, I wonder if it was a success?'

'Whaa—What—was a success?' asked Jonah, yawning broadly.

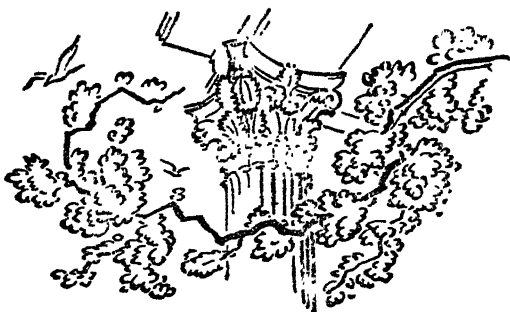
'The man-hunt,' said Evan, undoing his tie. 'Surely you know why Granny gave this affair! It was to let the male population of the county look over the beautiful Isabel. She's to be given a chance to set herself up for life, if she uses her head.'

'Who with?' asked Jonah, suddenly unhappy. 'Not one of us, surely. Not Ward Perry, so drunk he can't even count all his debts most of the time. Or McQuiddy—with ten years more to go before he's a country doctor.'

'What's the matter with me?' asked Evan mischievously. 'Oh, not now—but in four or five years. Just time enough to raise her the way I like 'em.'

Jonah looked up from unlacing his shoe, gave it a tug and aimed at Evan's head. It hit the door with a thud as Evan closed it, laughing.

For a long time Jonah sat and looked at his injured foot. At last he got up and blew out the lamp, undressing in the dark. He lay down sadly, expecting to be awake for a long time flaying himself with his new unhappiness, which like a cloud, dark but ineffable, hung over him at the thought of any of them being old enough to think of marriage, of Isabel contrasting him with men of marriageable age and property. But almost instantly he succumbed to the bed's smooth comfort, and was deep in sleep.



CHAPTER EIGHT

BEFORE the moon, whose light had fallen so softly on Ward and Isabel, had gone down in the west, the night had turned chill and misty. Rain fell at dawn, and Virginia Perry, standing by her dining-room window at nine that morning, shivered a little, feeling the crispness in the air. She saw that almost overnight the season had changed perceptibly. Against an odd, grey-blue sky the red leaves of the blackgum and dogwood were bright in contrast. She opened the casement window a little and leaned out, breathing deeply of the damp, leaf-mould odour which she loved.

It was a pleasant room on which she turned her back. Long and low, its hand-hewn beams were just above a man's head. Between them the boards were painted white and around three of the rough plaster walls casement windows opened into a green garden, which most of the year suggested an under-sea coolness. At one end of the room a French door opened into the yard; at the other was a broad stone fireplace in which a log fire crackled cheerfully. On the ash-stained hearth three beagles, Julia, Juanita, and Jack, slumbered in perfect relaxation. As Virginia stood sniffing the sooty smell of the fog, Julia, who was on the outer rim of dog bodies, felt the chill from the open window blow on her back. She opened one eye in her sweet wrinkled face and clambered over Jack. The chilliness hit Jack presently and he

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somnambulantly crawled over the toasting Juanita and Julia, who was now next to the hearth. Juanita, casting a disgruntled glare at Virginia's back, slithered over the other two. This manoeuvre not only brought her close to the grateful warmth of the fire, but too close. As she melted into a puddle of brown and white fur on the warm hearth, she suddenly rose with a shriek. She had come down on a bit of still-red and glowing wood and her cries of anguish filled the room. Jack and Julia, roused from their lethargy, began to shriek with her, and the three of them in an idiotic frenzy raced around and around the room, baying and yelping like mad. Virginia, startled, turned from the window and slammed it shut, looking about her for something with which to flay them.

'Shut up, you fiends!' she screamed, adding her own voice to the pandemonium. '*Quiet*, I say!' She grabbed up a short riding-whip and slashed at them, laying about fiercely. The roars were increased by sharp yelps of pain; the racing about became wilder. Virginia hit at the dogs as they went by, struck a cup which bounced off the table like a tiddledewink and broke with a tiny chatter on the floor.

'Drat you, stop this infernal racket!' screamed Virginia, 'I'll break every bone in your bodies!'

The dogs retreated under the table, still baying and whimpering, and looked out from under the cloth with such mournful eyes, such drooping ears on either side of their silly, pansy-like faces, that she laughed in spite of herself.

'Stupid apes,' she muttered affectionately, 'never learn. Do the same dumb stunts every day. *Now be quiet!*' she roared, as, sensing from her tone that they were forgiven, the dogs crept out to hug the fire again.

'Dey ain't goner be quiet ever so long as dere's a fiah fer dem fools ter bu'n deyse'ves on,' said a soft voice from the door. 'Dawgs oughter be kep' out do's. Den they wouldn't be sheddin' dey hairs all ober de place, draggin' dey bones on de parlour carpet, and raisin' all dishyere ruckus when folks tryin' ter sleep.'

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'Who's tryin' to sleep?' asked Virginia, sitting down as Pink set the platter of bacon and the bowl of grits before her. 'Bring my coffee. You know I always want my coffee first.'

'Yes, Ma'm. I'se bringin' it. I knows you laks it pipin' hot, too.'

Pink's round fudge-coloured face was filled with sanctimonious solicitation. 'Rat out de pot, you laks it, and dat's de way it's comin' dis berry minute.'

Virginia threw her cigarette into the fire and helped herself to grits and bacon, put a chunk of butter into the middle of the grits, and watched it melt with childish anticipation.

Luther Perry came in humming 'The Old Rebel's Song' off key, as chipper and rubicund as if he had not been up till all hours and practically swimming in mint juleps, only the night before.

'Why can't you sing that thing on key—if you must sing it?' asked Virginia, passing him the plate she had just taken and helping herself to another.

Pink came in with the coffee, set the two cups down, hovered, moving the silver cream pitcher and sugar-bowl nearer to her until Mrs. Perry gave him an exasperated look.

'You're a good one to talk about holding a tune, my dear,' said Luther, tucking his napkin into his collar. 'You couldn't carry a tune in a basket.'

'I can't lay an egg,' she retorted, 'but I know a bad one when I see it.'

Pink snorted and spread a large hand across his mouth.

'Biscuits,' said Virginia, and he vanished.

They buttered the brown circles he brought slowly and began to eat. It was good, Virginia thought, to be alive on a gorgeous fall morning, to eat plain food that was well cooked and tasty, to feel life in every limb and to look forward to the day ahead of them. Good, and satisfying.

Ward came in with the mail, which he laid at his father's place. He was pale and his face was puffy and sullen. He stooped and kissed his mother.

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'He looks older than his father,' she thought, 'but he's handsome, even at his worst.'

Ward yawned and shivered and she helped him to food while the ubiquitous Pink brought coffee, hot biscuits, marmalade.

'How did you enjoy the party?' she asked, expecting some patronizing rejoinder from her youngest who had been reluctant to go to such a 'kid affair.'

'All right, all *right*!' he answered with unexpected cheerfulness. 'It was a very good party indeed!'

'Oh, she was, was she?' asked Virginia shrewdly, and was surprised to see Ward change colour. He looked up at her quickly and something undefended and wistful in his bloodshot eyes made her feel suddenly depressed. A flash of remorse went over her, and all at once she saw, with bitter revelation, something that most of her life she had kept pushed behind her because it was easier and pleasanter to do so.

'I've spoiled him,' she thought sadly. 'I've let him ruin his life because he amused me and I was a soft old fool. People think I'm hard because I'm gruff, but I'm not; I'm a soft old fool, and no help to anybody. He's fallen in love with that little silly-dilly, and now he realizes he isn't worth a tinker's damn.'

She looked down at her plate to hide the fear and the pity in her eyes which unaccountably were full of quick, hot tears.

While he was sugaring his coffee, she surreptitiously wiped her eyes and cleared her throat. 'So you liked the young lady?'

'She's lovely, madame,' said Ward in the half-joking deference he always paid her. 'She—you never told me that she was a beauty,' he added. 'The most beautiful woman I ever saw.'

Luther tossed three letters to Virginia, who put them aside. 'Oh, pshaw!' she said. 'Come now. What about Evie Trent—those black eyes and that magnolia-blossom skin you used to rave about. Or Bobbie Shafer—the red-headed one—you used to write poetry to her. And there was little Bessie Somebody who looked like a mouse with red cheeks—only prettier, I admit—she was everything divine, if I remember.'

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Ward grinned, but an instant later he was sober. 'This one's different.' He turned in his chair, laying his napkin beside his plate. The firelight, from behind Virginia, fell on his face, flushed and eager and handsome in spite of its lines, and lighted his dark eyes.

'The moment I touched her, I knew,' he said.

'Knew what?' asked his mother uncomfortably. She crumbled a biscuit and stared at her coffee-cup as if she expected to read his future there.

Ward glanced at Luther, absorbed in *The Daily Racing Form*. He leaned towards his mother and said in a low tone: 'I mean to ask her to marry me. God, she's so beautiful! So sweet—and—innocent! She's the kind that would stick to a man, I betcha, through anything. Poor little thing—just think, Mamma, she's all alone in the world. All she has is what the Tremonts give her. I want to take her out of there. I want to buy her velvet and lace and pearls. I want to see her riding to hunt, dancing in a ball-room, even—God, I even want to see her in the role of a mother!'

He looked as though this last stilted statement had been pulled out of him by an impulse stronger than his own glibness, as indeed it had. He couldn't look Virginia in the eye now, and she was glad of it. He got up and began to pace the room, stretching his arms, walking back and forth excitedly.

'And what are you going to buy all this velvet and pearls with?' asked Virginia coldly. She was miserable because she couldn't give him all he wanted to throw away on this little fripp; more miserable because she had brought him up incapable of making it for himself. Ward, she knew, had never given two thoughts in his life as to where his money came from. That there might be an end to it had never entered his head. How near that end was, only she and Luther knew, and what this helpless, handsome, and utterly worthless child of theirs would do when he was thrown on his own was already keeping her awake at night.

'Haven't we plenty?' he asked, laughing. 'We Perrys'll never be poor as long as there's horseflesh. How's the racing news, Pop?' he asked, turning to Luther. 'How's our future?'

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Luther didn't answer. He frowned over a page which his eyes apparently could not see clearly. A faint purplish tinge had come over his face. He dropped the form and clutched at his throat.

Virginia, her face as white as the walls about her, stood up and ran to him, crying, 'My God, he's had a stroke! Get Pink! Get Sam! Oh, my God, he's dying!'

For the next few moments there was pandemoniac horror. Pink came tearing in from the kitchen, gave Luther one look and fled, to reappear with Sam, the ancient gardener, and Penny, the cook. The beagles, sensing calamity, began to howl vociferously. Virginia, losing all self-control, wept and cursed alternately and hindered the darkies whom she had ordered to remove Luther to his bed.

'I'll get the doctor!' said Ward, shaken and glad to escape. He hurried to the stables, where, with only a blanket across his fastest mare, he swung out under the trees and down the road. In his excitement he had not thought to telephone. To Ward, as to his father, the surest way to get anything done was on horseback.

And Virginia sitting miserably by the giant fourposter bed—that double bed in which she and Luther had been so close and so dear—listened to his laboured breathing with terror, while from her staring eyes the tears slid slowly and quietly down her cheeks. She wondered if Ward's careless remarks about their money had by their implication brought this on, if Luther had been more harassed than she knew, and again grim remorse at the useless son she had brought up rose in an ache in her throat and choked her.

Old Luther Perry did not die, but neither did he fully recover. He never rode again or spent the night drinking juleps, and only once more in the short rest of his life did he sing 'The Old Rebel's Song.'

At Riverridge Jennifer worried about him, missed Virginia Perry's stringent personality, and was depressed by the thought of the brevity of her own remaining years. Lucile, concerned with

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her new home, too heavy in body to come back and forth, was of no comfort to her. Evan had gone back to his father and college, and Dorothy was off for her first year away at school. Jonah, too, went each day to school in town and at night was absorbed in his books. Tremont, Isabel, and Lutie—who came over each week-end to stay with her grandmother—were her sole diversions.

Of the two at home, Isabel had the most time for the lonely old woman, and Jennifer responded eagerly to her desire to learn all she could of the ways of the household. For hours she sorted linen, counted silver, copied recipes and household hints, learned to darn and to superintend the care of the elaborately furnished house from top to bottom.

Chloe, at Jennifer's command, reluctantly let her into the kitchen to try her hand at bread-making and other culinary skills. She inspected the storeroom and learned how much food it took to serve the house each day, what 'dog-dinner'—that repulsive mess of cornbread, bones, pig tails, and meat scraps that seemed to simmer incessantly on the back of the stove—was, but she did not learn to cook. Chloe sullenly declared that she 'couldn't gib her no recipe, she jes' tuk a pinch o' dis and a few cups o' dat,' and that the real art of cooking was in the handling. Jennifer, knowing that both statements were true, gave up and removed Isabel, herself, and wheel chair from Chloe's gloomy inhospitality.

Occasionally some of the young men who had been asked to the party made more than a party-call, like wary young trout nibbling at a bait; but Isabel, lacking the stimulus of the dance and Cud'n Algie's punch, sat stiff and self-conscious, looking at them appraisingly from under her lids, while Jennifer, hungry for news and company, naturally sociable and dominant, stole each scene and made Isabel appear pale and stupid by contrast.

To callers of Jennifer's age and state Isabel seemed demure and wholly desirable. She was invariably polite and sat drinking in their words with a flattering attention unusual in one of the 'young people of today.' Nothing in her eager eyes and parted lips, her deferentially tilted head, told them that it was for her-

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self alone that she was so completely absorbed. They did not dream that she harvested every tone and gesture, culled each phrase of social intimacy and genealogy, storing it away like a careful squirrel, to bring out and use in the future.

On those nights on which Jennifer could not come to the supper table, Isabel, with an affected modesty, served in her place, and as the autumn wore on, it became more and more usual to see her at the foot of the table, now made smaller so that the four of them could talk with less effort. It was natural that, filling Jennifer's chair, she should occasionally give orders to the servants who waited on the table, and this she did with no diffidence whatsoever, but with an imperious firmness that won their respect. Within a month after Lucile had moved away, Isabel was practically the housekeeper at Riverridge.

When Dorothy had been planning to go to school, Jennifer had made tentative suggestions that Isabel be sent, too. But the girl's undisguised horror at the thought persuaded Jennifer to yield to her own desire and keep Isabel by her side. The girl was unstintingly obliging, and although Jennifer never asked her to read—preferring to listen to Jonah in the few moments which he could steal from his studies—there was nothing which Isabel was asked to do which she did not willingly and capably perform.

Occasionally Ran came over and played the piano for Jennifer, and they sang 'Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair,' 'Tenting Tonight,' or, 'Won't You Come Home, Bill Bailey?' which seemed unbearably sad to Lutie, if she were there to hear it, and moved her to tears.

On the nights when one or two of the young men called, they invariably asked to sing ballads or love-songs, and Jonah, watching them as they rolled lovesick eyes at Isabel, was torn between amusement and jealousy.

On a blowy night late in October, Ran and Lucile's fourth child was born, a lusty boy who came into the world kicking and began to scream at once. The birth was difficult, and for a long time thereafter it looked as if this robust infant had sapped his

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mother's entire strength. But her happiness in him, her eagerness to superintend her new house, and her deep-rooted feeling, almost a superstition, that life had once again settled into good and normal ways for her, at last drew Lucile out of her deep apathy.

The fall passed swiftly and winter had begun to settle in with the families, both houses, absorbed in their own plans. Things seemed to have fallen into quiet ways except for two incidents, and of these no one at the time realized the significance.

One was that Lutie had her seventh birthday—and Jennifer had a heart attack.

Down in the Riverridge kitchen the day after Little Ranny's birth, Chloe and Fount had teased Lutie about the new baby.

'Come hyere and lemme feel dat nose,' Fount had cried, catching the little girl and holding her in front of him. 'Um—Um!' he added with exaggerated dolour, as with the small nose between his fingers he moved his hand gently from side to side while Lutie watched him with wide, baffled eyes. 'Outer jint. Po' li'l chile! Looky hyere, Chloe—looky dis po' li'l nose. Plumb outer jint ef ever I did see a nose dater way!'

Chloe, wiping her hands on her apron, came and stood over Lutie. She knocked Fount's hand aside and felt the nose herself. A lugubrious expression came over her face as, shaking her head, she agreed, "'Twon't never be de same ergin. Po' chile—dat nose done done fer now!'

Then, as Lutie gingerly felt for herself and crossed her eyes in an attempt to see what damage had been done to it, they roared with derisive laughter, Chloe throwing her hands over her head and Fount doubling over his chair.

Lutie, furious, ran from the room and out of the house, holding her nose as she went. A moment later she appeared in her grandmother's room and dragging a chair to the bureau stood up on it and leaned forward, staring closely at her reflection. Jennifer looked curiously at the seat of ruffled drawers turned up to her, but Sibby said, 'What you doin' clim'in' up dere on yo'

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Gramma's bureau? Git down fo' I smack you. You wanter brek all de bottles an' t'ings? Git down!

'I just wanted to see my nose,' said Lutie firmly, backing down off the chair. She felt it again and then walked slowly over to Jennifer who was still in bed.

'What's the matter with your nose?' asked Jennifer.

'Chloe and Fount'—Lutie paused, torn between wrath and tears—'Chloe and Fount said it was out of joint.'

Jennifer laughed, but at the same time she made an inviting gesture and Lutie climbed up on the broad bed beside her.

'Poor childie,' said Jennifer, stroking the bright hair awkwardly with her stiff hands. 'You're just finding out what every human finds out off and on all during his life—that you can always be replaced. It's just a silly expression which means that you've given up your place to a new brother or sister.'

'Have I?' asked Lutie wonderingly.

'Of course you have! *You* don't want to be a baby, do you? Why, let—me—see—— Don't you have a birthday very soon?'

Lutie nodded.

'And how old will you be?' asked Jennifer, who knew to the moment when this child had been born. 'Five—six—?'

'Seven, Grandma!' said Lutie reproachfully. She sat up and looked at Jennifer in exasperation.

'Seven? Well, bless me! I should say you aren't a baby! Why, by the time you've lived that long again you'll be fourteen—almost as old as Dorothy! Good gracious! I guess this will have to be a rather special birthday, don't you?'

Sibby, grunting her disapproval of such pampering, went out carrying a bundle of bed-linen. Their voices trailed after her, and she thought with proud tenderness that Jennifer's planning of a pink cake 'with candles *and* roses' was as excited as Lutie's.

It was a 'special' birthday, and by the time it was over Lutie was not only completely reconciled to the state of her nose, but felt she had grown as incredibly as 'Alice' when she ate the little cake marked, 'Eat Me,' in the book which Jonah had given her.

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She was so proud of this growing up—and so afraid she might lose the feeling—that she wanted to do something to crystallize it. Girls Dorothy's age could show that they were growing up in numerous ways. They put up their hair, they minced their words, they screamed at the sight of worms and mice, and they giggled. But at seven one had to do something drastic, something outside of one's clothes or manners, to show that life has taken on a seriousness.

Lutie decided to give up her dolls. Her dolls, to Lutie, were very real. They had distinct and permanent personalities. They satisfied a maternal hunger already in her. Except for an occasional cute little coloured child Lutie had very few playmates her own age and her dolls had become real companions. It would be a great sacrifice, but she would make it.

One afternoon, when the November sun lay red over the woods and fields of Riverridge, Lutie gathered her family together and set out to dispose of them. She followed a forbidden path to the river and for a long time stood looking down into the muddy, slow-moving water, while the red-and-yellow leaves fell mournfully about her. But she had once seen a puppy that had been drowned, and the memory of that swollen body, those filmed and staring eyes, was more than she could bear. She looked a moment at Francetta's lovely red locks, at Boy Blue's almost dainty sailor suit, and at the plaster cheeks of Suki, and she turned and went slowly back toward the house.

In the garden Pompey was mulching the roses and peonies, and after watching him for a few minutes Lutie knew what she had to do. The dolls must be buried in her grandmother's garden where they could always be a part of the beauty that was Riverridge. But when she told Pompey, he was shocked and refused to have anything to do with it.

'Yo' Mammy goner tan you—th'owin' away good playthings lak dat. Tek dem dolls on home,' he ordered, 'an' behave yo'se'f!'

Lutie saw that there was no use arguing with Pompey. She

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couldn't expect such an old man to remember what growing up meant. Nor could she hope that Pompey could know what a sacrifice this gesture was. She left at once, with the dolls under her arm, and in the house she met Jonah, his hair rumpled, a smudge of ink across his face, coming from Jennifer's room.

'What's this?' he asked, pulling her red tam-o'-shanter straight, 'a family reunion?'

'I'm goner bury 'em,' said Lutie hardly. 'I want Grandma to tell Pompey he's got to dig me a hole.'

'Bury them? What for? They dead or something?'

'I'm through with 'em,' said Lutie, looking up at him. The baby doll's pink rubber bottom turned up to him, too, with something like appeal in its bare roundness. One eye of Francetta rolled hopelessly towards him, and the Jap doll seemed to have lost something of her usual aplomb.

'But why bury them? Why not give them to some other little girl? Give them to Chloe to give to her grandchildren——'

Something in the tightened grip on the dolls, in the pale urgency of the small uplifted face, stopped him. He said, 'Oh, well, why not? They're yours. I'll ask Granny where we can plant 'em. Wait—I'll get my sweater and go with you.'

He was back in a moment, and the amusement in his eyes made her know that Jennifer had explained the growing-up to him. He went to the back of the hall and came towards her pulling a red sweater over his head. Years later she was to remember his laughing face, his rumpled hair, as they emerged from the sweater's turtleneck, and to think with sudden nostalgia how good he had always been to her.

Now he took two of the dolls under one arm and walked beside her. In the chill wind they stood over the outraged Pompey while he dug three separate holes and Lutie laid the dolls in, one at a time.

When the last doll was covered, Jonah took Lutie's hand and she looked up at him.

'Well, it's all over. Where are you going now?'

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'Home,' said Lutie. 'Thank you, Jonah. And thank you, Pompey,' she said, turning back to him. She seemed so forlorn that Jonah felt anxious about her. He watched her until she reached the gate and went through. She was just at the spot where she had found the dying thrush when he called after her.

'I'll make you some little wooden "tombstones" with "Here lies Francetta" and all, on them. Shall I?'

She looked back at him and nodded, waving a little hand that was red with the cold. Then she went on into the woods. He watched her a moment before he turned towards the house, smiling to himself, thinking that it was no wonder that her grandmother adored her, she was so full of surprises.

When she had gone a little way into the wood, Lutie paused and looked back. She felt miserably unhappy. There was something wrong with the whole burial of the dolls. She had meant it to be a private affair, like a secret sacrificial rite. It was associated in her mind with the feeling that she had when Jennifer told her about the vigils of the Knights of the Holy Grail. She wished now that she had had the courage to go out alone in the cold moonlight and bury the dolls by herself in the woods. Now she might dig them up and bury them a dozen times, in the most remote spots—it would be no good, the charm had been broken, the ceremony destroyed.

Even Jonah had been amused, she thought, with an ache in her throat. The rest of the grown-ups would hear of it and tease her. She, herself, was not sure what the significance of the burial was, but whatever she had striven for had escaped her, blown away by the breath of laughter and ridicule.

She came back to the open space between the wood and Jennifer's garden and stood looking about her. The house, which she could see clearly now that some of the leaves had fallen, looked as white as a sea shell among the bright-coloured trees. It seemed gigantic, immutable, and suddenly she felt an aching pride in it. She drew herself up and turned to stare across the river. The bluff on the ridge was clothed with buck-

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berry, a rising tide of soft purplish pink. The sun on it was breath-takingly beautiful, and she stared and stared as though she would take into her mind forever this blush of loveliness.

Pompey had left the garden and a chill wind was rising. There was a loneliness now about the place which filled her with a sort of ecstasy. She walked quickly through the garden and down the lawn to the rear of the house, past the poultry yards and the quarters and to the field at the foot of the ridge. Her red tam and sweater looked like brighter berries moving through the waist-high scrub.

Never in all of her life had she dared to ascend the ridge and to stand on the very edge of the bluff looking down into the dizzying water below. She began to climb rapidly, her short legs whipped by the tough buckberry stems, her face flushed and earnest. Half-way she was out of breath, but she trudged on, slower and slower, until at last she was on the blunted top. Her legs were weak with fatigue and with the sudden terror of what seemed a tremendous height to her in the strange light of a winter sunset.

The hardest part was yet to come. She moved towards the edge of the bluff and her legs buckled under her. On her hands and knees, through the short brown grass, she crawled until she could see the red-brown river below.

She would allow herself no compromise. She had said to herself she would stand on the bluff and look down. For a long moment she lay there feeling the world whirl around as though at any minute it might throw her off at a tangent. But at last she rose and, closing her eyes, stood on the very edge of the bluff. When she felt steadier, she opened them. It was more terrible than she had imagined, a sheer drop of a hundred feet of bare stone, and, below, the river, like a hungry serpent, crawling. She made herself stare for some time, and then, stepping back, turned and ran down the hill as fast as her legs would take her. The wind against her face was cold, the shadows of the house and the trees lay black on the field before her as the flaming sun

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went down. It was a world of hobgoblins and fire, but she was exalted by her achievement. Now she was no longer a baby; she had conquered something larger than herself. She ran against the sweet cold wind, she relished the sting of the buckberry stems, she felt like a bird flying, as if she could fly forever.

In her room at Riverridge, Jennifer had seen the strange red object mounting the river bluff. It was not until Lutie stood upright at the very summit and was outlined against the sky that she saw that it was her darling. A horrible fear took hold of her. She remembered that Lutie had just buried her dolls. What morbid reaction had taken this timid child to a place which had always terrified her? Suddenly, as Jennifer watched, her throat dry with fright, Lutie disappeared. She immediately supposed that Lutie had fallen and her heart contracted in a knot of excruciating pain. Bands of fire snapped about her chest, her breath seemed cut off. Sibby, hearing her choke, ran fearfully and tried to distinguish the gasping words. It was Jonah, coming from the library, who realized that it was Lutie she was frightened for. He ran out of the back door, saw Lutie running with arms outstretched, and called to her. She stopped and he hurried out to meet her. Carrying her into her grandmother's room, he set the child before the old lady. Jennifer's face was blue, her eyes distended in agony. Jonah was terrified, but as soon as Lutie spoke, Jennifer seemed to relax.

'All—right—now!' she gasped, giving him a grateful look. 'Thought—Lutie fell.'

'Whar you been?' asked Sibby, made angry by her fright. 'You mos' kill' yo' Gran'ma, actin' lak a tom-boy all de time. You oughter be home eatin' yo' supper—it's mos' dahk.'

'Shall I get Grandad?' asked Jonah, watching Jennifer's face in misery.

'No, no! Don't tell him. I—I was just frightened, that's all. Take Lutie home—then come back and read to me. Don't mention this to anybody. I'm quite—all right.'

But Jonah was horribly depressed. For the first time he

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realized that Jennifer was old enough to die; that some day her prolonged weakness would still the voice that he loved best which in every crisis of his life had brought him comfort and advice. He took his unhappiness out on Lutie and lectured her severely most of the way home. His fright had transferred itself to the child, and when, in the light of Lucile's kitchen, he told her good-bye, he had a twinge of remorse at her white and forlorn face. He stooped and kissed her, whispering, 'Oh, don't take it so hard. Only don't after this go hopping up and down on dangerous bluffs and scaring people half to death.'

Limping back to Riverridge, he felt his own depression come down on him again and his throat closed with agony at the thought of Riverridge without Jennifer.

After Lutie had gone to bed that night, Lucile heard her sobbing and went in to comfort her. She had taken the hot and tear-stained little figure into her arms and rocked her, and though Lutie had stoutly denied that she had been crying, she gave herself up utterly to the bliss of lying once more in her mother's arms, of hearing murmured over her head the old familiar words and tunes of comfort.

When she had fallen asleep and was relaxed except for an occasional catch of her breath, Lucile and Ran, who had come looking for her, stood and smiled down at her.

'Poor baby,' murmured Ran, who had heard the story of the burying from Jennifer earlier in the evening. 'She misses her dollies. I'll get her another for Christmas, a bigger and better one than any she's ever had. She's nothing but a baby herself; we mustn't expect her to grow up too fast.'

And Lucile nodded, her mouth curved in tenderness. Neither of them knew that Lutie cried, not for her dolls, not even for growing up, but because she had realized in a vague and frightening way that man is too often the victim of an impenetrable loneliness.



CHAPTER NINE

THE fall was mild and long-drawn-out that year, and Jennifer sat out of doors as often as possible, as though she felt that every drift of wood-smoke, every faint and wistful cry of the geese overhead, were hers for the last time.

In early morning the mist rose from the river in fine threads which looked like silver grass. Through it the brown water gleamed brightly, except between the ridges—where the mist was as thick as a roll of cotton. The banks on either side were covered with the red-gold broom, purplish-pink buckberry, and dotted with maples, scarlet and lemon yellow. The wild aster, the purple of many of the shrubs, lent a soft-grey blueness to the whole landscape. Jennifer stared avidly at each day's display as if memory might outlast death.

Dorothy, after the customary few days of homesickness, wrote enthusiastically about her school and begged Isabel to send her a picture of herself. 'I've told them how scrumptiously beautiful you are,' she wrote. 'They can't believe it. Tell Granny I want one more than anything in the world—and she'll get it for me!'

Jennifer had smiled wryly at the effusive letter, but a day or so later had had her husband drive Isabel in to town, where, dressed in a demure turban and a jacket whose high fur collar set off her flawless skin and brought out the softness of her eyes,

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she had peeped demurely over her muff at the photographer. Dorothy's response to the gift had made Jennifer groan with dismay, and grumble to Tremont. 'To think a grandchild of mine should have so little restraint, and be so sickeningly sentimental about another *girl*!'

'It's just a form of hero-worship,' Tremont had answered. He was standing before his shaving-mirror cautiously scraping at his lean jaws. 'Just a phase. In a year or two she'll be just as excited over some Tom, Dick, or Harry.'

'I hope so,' said Jennifer slowly. 'I sometimes wish Dorothy didn't go into things—so strenuously. She gives herself so unstintingly to every new enthusiasm. People like that are always being hurt. Some day she may be hurt so deeply—that she'll never get over it.'

'No-oo,' said Tremont lightly. 'She's the kind that rises as highly as she falls deeply—if you know what I mean,' he added, laughing. 'She's just an impulsive, romantic child. She'll get over these enthusiasms as she meets all sorts and kinds of people. She's been sheltered too much—gives too much importance to the things that happen to her. I think school will be good for her.'

'I suppose so,' said Jennifer dubiously. She watched him with affection as he stretched his face up in a *moue*, to make the shaving easier. Not many men could look handsome in such a ridiculous pose, she thought, with a deep chuckle. He caught her eye in the mirror and grinned, his dark gaze as warm as Jonah's. When he had finished shaving, he powdered his face and dried it off, put on his shirt and tie and came over to her. Even before he stooped over, she knew the sensation of her own lips against his face, of the touch of his soft, lean cheek over the thin jaw.

'I'm a lucky woman,' she said with sudden, rare emotion. 'Lucky—and very happy, John.'

'Dear!' he murmured, and kissed her again.

She followed him to the door with her eyes, and lay listening to his brisk footsteps on the hall carpet, with a smile on her face.

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'Mistuh John sho a gran' man,' said Sibby from the hearth where she was doctoring the fire. 'Peers lak he git spryer ever' day.'

'Yes, Sibby—he's a grand man,' said Jennifer. 'Come and brush my hair. I'm going to get up early today. Do you know that in less than three weeks the children will be home for Christmas?'

'Christmas? In three weeks?' Sibby stood, poker in hand, and stared. 'Why, we ain't had hawg-killin' yet!'

'“Hawg-killin’,”' mimicked Jennifer disgustedly. 'It hasn't been cold enough, up until this week, for hawg-killin'. We've been making fruitcake—haven't you been grumbling because Jonah and Lutie and I picked the nuts in here and got the hulls all over the carpet? It's just three weeks until the school vacations. And Miss Lucile's going to town this very day to buy Christmas wrappings and all the candy for the tree and toys for the children in the quarters. There's my list on my desk—Mr. Jonah typed it for me. Hurry now, I want to be dressed when Miss Lucy comes!'

'Ack jest lak a chile,' grumbled Sibby, moving unhurriedly about to lay out Jennifer's clothes—the silk-and-wool union suit, the white cashmere petticoat that she wore just to her knees, the white cambric one with three ruffles of heavy embroidery and the long black silk one, the wool stockings to protect her from the draughty floors, and a black-and-white silk dress as crisp and fresh as a china plate. Jennifer began impatiently unplaiting her braids.

December broke like March, in a bluster of windy rain and sudden breath-taking sunshine. Then came dreary days of cold and sleet, and one afternoon at dusk, as Jonah and Ransome waited at the station for a south-bound train bearing Dorothy and Evan home, the rain froze on the trees so that the whole world seemed made of glass.

Dorothy was the first off the train, her face warm and laughing

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under her fur-trimmed hat. She ran pell-mell into her father's arms, and, laughing, waved her muff over Ran's shoulder at Jonah. He noted with a pang that already she had changed. Before he could define just how, his breath was knocked out of him by Evan and he found himself shaking hands with his Uncle James Crockett.

Crockett was a small, neat, darkly red-haired man who always reminded Jonah of a quiet amiable fox. He was a head shorter than his son and had none of his dashing ways, but a grace and self-assurance that made him likeable.

'He makes a good dinner guest,' Jennifer once said of him ironically, but actually she had a great respect for him and a tenderness, because she knew for a fact that in the face of many feminine wiles and intrigues he had remained faithful to the memory of her daughter.

They bundled into the surrey on which the curtain had been drawn and sped over the crisply frozen road under the glassy trees.

It was dark in the carriage and Jonah wished impatiently that they were home so that he could see Dorothy's face again and determine what change there was in her. She wore her hair tied back, he had noticed at the station, and already in these few short weeks her face had lost some of its young roundness.

'She's beautiful!' he thought lovingly, and his mind went to Isabel, cool and pale and seemingly years older.

James Crockett lighted a cigar, and Dorothy looked back from the front seat, squinting her eyes against the light, and laughed across at Jonah, who smiled back, warmly happy to have her home again.

'Gran's having a fit, I'll bet,' he said. 'The train was twenty minutes late.'

'She's been waiting since two o'clock,' said Ran with a chuckle. 'I never saw a woman like her. We're spending tonight at Riverridge,' he added to Dorothy. 'Your mother thought Granny'd like it.'

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Jonah turned towards Evan, silent in the other corner of the back seat and wondered if he was thinking of Isabel.

'I'm driving in the back way,' said Ransome as they approached the house. 'I don't like to go under big trees when they're heavy with ice, like this. I've seen too many of them topple.'

Suddenly the dark was broken by the streaming lights from the house, there was a wild barking of dogs, and in the chicken yard the guineas chattered harshly. The carriage wheels crackled on the frozen ground and the hooves of the horses played a little tattoo as they came to an abrupt stop.

Then almost at once they were in the house and everything was brilliant and sparkling and full of the noises of joy and welcome.

Jonah never forgot that night—there was so much to remember—and it came back to him time and again through the years like little bits of tinsel that are found about the house long after the Tree is gone.

There was his grandmother's face as she welcomed them, alight with love and her pleasure in a 'to-do' as Sibby called it; Lucile, looking slim and well again with her small son on one arm, his dark, already knowing eyes staring about; his grandfather in a black suit and white shirt; and there was Isabel.

When he had left the house an hour before, Isabel had been dressing. She stood now dressed in soft bright red wool which lent an unusual colour to her cheeks, with a sprig of holly berries caught in the braids around her head. Her eyes looked more darkly blue and, Jonah noticed, they went again and again to Evan's ruddy, laughing face.

Evan had kissed her soundly when he had come in as though he made no difference between her and the rest of his family, but Jonah, alert with envy, had seen the passion flare in her eyes and had known that no matter how lightly Evan regarded the caress, to Isabel it was like finding a cold spring after a long siege in the desert.

James Crockett had given her a startled, flattering look when

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he had been introduced to her and then turned to talk to Tremont of business affairs in the East.

The dinner table was ablaze with candles. Hothouse roses nodded over the mirror in which Evan had watched Isabel on her first night there. There was laughter and chatter and the savour of rich food, and Jennifer was completely happy.

After dinner Ransome sat down at the piano and the rest gathered about to sing. Dorothy, with her arms around her mother's waist, swayed to the tunes, while Jonah, leaning on the piano, stared his heart out at Isabel. Evan, moving closer to her, sang boldly;

'Sighing like the night wind and sobbing like the rain,
Wailing for the lost one who comes not again.
Oh! I long for Jeanie and my heart bows low,
Never more to find her where the bright waters flow.'

Later, Ward Perry came in, bringing the breath of winter and a sweet tenor voice. He joined the singing and pulled Isabel's attention away from Evan for a while, but once, after they had been looking for some old music of Ran's, Evan leaned near Isabel behind the grand piano and put his arm around her waist.

They sang a nonsense rhyme with a giddy tune. Ran pounded the piano lustily and Evan threw back his head and sang. The light from a bracket of candles shone on his bright hair and his laughing, faun-like face.

'Ducks in the millpond.
A-geese in the ocean.
A-hug them pretty gals,
If I take a notion!'

He squeezed Isabel's waist, and Jonah, flushing, felt as though a hand had reached into his breast and pulled out his heart, as Chloe reached into the body of a slain fowl and drew out its entrails. Like a revealing lightning flash it was suddenly clear to him that, while he had been shut away in his attic room in the summer, trying to create a picture of Isabel for his own satisfaction, Evan had been making actual progress in her good graces and that his absence at school had only enhanced his

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attractiveness to her. She was probably lost to him already, Jonah thought with shock; and for the first time admitted to himself that the idea was intolerable. He was unhappy for the rest of the evening, not so much from jealousy as from the old resentment of Evan's assurance and success. Evan not only was older, handsomer, but he could ride better, sing better, and court with more confidence. Jonah had a sweeter and more moving voice than Evan's, but he would have bitten off his tongue now rather than have tried to outdo his cousin. He assumed a great indifference, and presently, with a murmured excuse, left and went to his room. He never knew that Evan, too, came upstairs almost directly, and that it was not Evan, not Ward, but Ransome Parks who dreamed of Isabel that night, dreamed hotly of taking her cold sweet beauty in his arms and destroying that almost doll-like composure with the passion of his kisses.

As Lucile was saying good night to Jennifer in her room, she asked, 'Mother, do you think that Ward is falling in love with Isabel?'

'He may be thinking of trying to marry her,' countered Jennifer. 'Why?'

'It just seemed to me that he was paying her a good deal of attention,' answered Lucile. 'I don't think he'd be a good match for her,' she added, with that peculiar air of assumed frankness which indicates that the speaker is holding something back.

'Because he drinks?' asked Jennifer, wincing as Sibby removed her underwear.

'That, and because—well, it's a sort of a secret Ransome told me. But I think you should know—on Isabel's account. They say that the Perrys are absolutely on rock bottom.'

Jennifer, gowned and lying painfully back among her pillows, said nothing for a long moment and then sighed.

'Poor Virgie. I knew she was worried, but I didn't know—— What else did Ran say?'

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'He said that Uncle Luther just hadn't made any money in years—he's lost a lot betting on horses, as you probably know. He's bought expensive horses and something's happened to them or else they've been taken for debt——'

'Poor Virgie,' repeated Jennifer.

'Ran thinks that's why Uncle Luther had this stroke,' went on Lucile, standing before her mother's bureau and filing a fingernail thoughtfully. 'He's been worried a long time and then Ward's been no help—drinking and throwing away money Uncle Luther had borrowed in an effort to help save himself. I don't think you'd want Isabel to marry Ward—would you?'

'She shan't,' said Jennifer firmly. 'I'll tell her myself. She's no fool. She knows exactly what she wants, and a drunken wastrel—I don't care who his people are or how charming he is—well, that's not what she's after. Poor, *poor* Virgie!'

Lucile bent and kissed her. 'Don't let it keep you awake,' she begged contritely. 'I shouldn't have told you now—just before you are going to bed. Anyway, worrying tonight can't help. It's been going on a long time, and by now probably they have worked out some plan.'

But Jennifer looked unconvinced. She lay there watching the fire, tempted to call John from his bed in the study. But she remembered Lucile's words and said to herself: 'It can wait tonight. As Lucy says, it's nothing new. But I must remember to tell Isabel to get rid of Ward. I hadn't realized it was getting serious.' Her mind wandered off into imagining what it would have been like had Ward been sober, industrious, and wealthy. And in this false maze she fell asleep.

In his wife's room Ransome dreamed of Isabel, and in hers Isabel stood before the log fire Jinny had built up for her and went over each look and gesture of Evan's. She was happy in the memory of them, but disturbed when she thought how his ambitions differed from hers. 'I must ask Dorothy just how much Evan will have and I'll talk to him about what

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he means to do. He always says he has no use for all this "old homestead stuff"—but—she smiled—"perhaps he may change."

It must take a lot of money to keep Riverridge as it was now, she mused; to extend the gracious hospitality it did, to have it always warm and bright and filled with the accoutrements of a lavish way of living. But without those it would be an empty shell. Whatever house she entered as mistress, thought Isabel with firmness, must have behind it enough actual cash to keep it up. She'd seen enough of genteel shabbiness, of people whose gay chatter was a little strained, who had to wear hand-me-down clothes when they mingled with their wealthier social equals, who lived in debt all their lives in order to keep up an appearance of wealth, or who, in the midst of grime and unkemptness, retained a pitiable, ridiculous pride in a glory that was long gone. Jennifer had become her ideal, and she meant, as nearly as possible, to fashion her life after Jennifer's. If she could not bring to such a house money of her own, then she would only marry where that money was already.

One night towards the last of December, Jennifer awoke suddenly. The big bedroom was quiet except for the soft sputtering of the fire which Sibby, by constant vigilance, kept alive all night. The shadows and lights from it danced on the walls and over the faces of all of Jennifer's family who were represented in the fifty-odd framed photographs which hung there.

Outside, the wind was blowing so keenly that it sounded like sleet. She could hear the branches of the mimosas creaking and the peculiar 'tziinnng!' of wind-blown, icy trees.

She was warm and, miraculously, free of pain. Her two great pillows, propping her up, embraced her like comforting arms. Her body under the down quilts, made especially to keep pressure from her often agonized limbs, lay lightly and snugly about her. She knew something she had not known for a long time—the simple pleasure of complete bodily comfort. It was

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enough just to lie here, suspended in painlessness, her family sleeping around her, and to be at peace.

Her mind seemed singularly alert. Much of her life crowded into it, and she remembered, not with nostalgia but with pleasure, the winters of her youth in England, the Christmas seasons there, the greens and the carols, the mighty meals and the sound of the fluty, bird-like voices (so unlike the Americans!) of her young friends. She thought, as she often did, of the skies of England where the clouds hung in the azure brilliance in great masses of snowy white, and under them the white cliffs, the fields of sweet clover, the apple orchards, the roses growing riotously, the hop fields, and the dear, green sod, all snug and pretty and so definitely *England*.

She remembered, as she often had, the first time she had seen John Tremont. She remembered how his hair had ruffled in the wind as they stood talking in her father's garden, and he had held the wide flower-basket all in a daze of shyness while she, confident and knowing that he was what she wanted, had consciously charmed.

'I had a big pink hat,' she thought now with amusement, and remembered the whiteness of her neck where the black hair grew upward like wisps of smoke, the clearness of her skin, and how her lashes were long enough to cast a shadow on the cheek-bones of her small face.

'I was a beauty,' she thought gleefully, and waggled her head so that the long braids slid up and down on the counterpane.

She chuckled, and Sibby stirred in her sleep. Jennifer's mind leaped to America with the movement, remembering the house as it was on their arrival, tarnished and unkempt like a beautiful woman who had taken to the streets, its fine lines and old richness still apparent.

Sibby murmured, 'Yes, baby,' and the tone recalled a long chain of events where the same kindly voice had brought comfort. She had heard it through the pangs of childbirth; after the deaths of her babies, it had soothed her in pain, comforted

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her in grief, cheered her in despair, and been a soft supplement to her laughter.

'Dear Sibby!' she murmured, looking at the brown face where pity and humour and utter selflessness had left their indelible tracery.

Sibby's face was as gnarled and as beautiful as an old tree thought Jennifer, and Sibby herself was like the tree of which the Negroes sang:

'Like a tree that is standing by the river,
I shall not be moved.'

Nothing moved Sibby from her steadfast loyalty, her grave, unswerving tenderness.

She thought of Virginia Perry and of their younger days together, and puzzled for a long time as to how she could help her. She conjured up a dozen plans for giving money to Virginia and rejected them all, knowing her friend's fierce independence.

She must remember to tell Isabel about Ward, she thought, her mind off at another rich tangent. She and Isabel could get to a point with a very few words. Isabel would never let her heart rule her head, and Jennifer had only to mention casually that Ward would have nothing and was incapable of making anything. Too bad. It would have been good if the two families could have been united, she thought, and then smiled at her own foolishness. She had forgotten for a moment that Isabel was not 'of' the family.

'She's a cool one,' she thought mildly. 'But she'll make a good wife. She'll never invite a crisis, but always look, like a cat, at every angle before she jumps. I'll tell her about Ward tomorrow. I wonder if she had noticed that he likes her. And I wonder who'll get her—who has enough to attract her.'

Presently she saw that the objects in the room were becoming more visible. The yellow light from the fire had died down and the wider-spread lightness was grey. Dawn was breaking. Outside, the trees crackled and snapped and occasionally there

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was a sliding, rushing sound, the crash and thump of a fallen mass of snow or a gigantic limb.

She began to feel drowsy now, and, turning, snuggled farther into her pillows, looking out of the slowly lightening window into the grey-white of the icy garden. The grey lightened, turned to silver, and then suddenly was bathed in a pink light of unearthly delicacy. The day had dawned, brilliant and breathtakingly beautiful. Every tree was a piece of ruby glass, the sky a feathered canopy of pink, each mackerel cloud like a floating iridescent rose petal.

The brightness woke Sibby, who got up, groaning, and went to the fire to stir it.

'Look!' said Jennifer. 'Isn't it lovely? Call Mr. Tremont, Sibby, I want him to see it.'

A moment later, in his bathrobe and with his grey hair ruffled as it had been that day in her father's garden, he stood by her bed.

'I've had such a lovely time, Johnny,' she said, calling him by the old name of his youth. 'I've been awake ages, feeling so comfortable and just enjoying my memories. And now look—did you ever see such a lovely, lovely dawn?'

The sky's pink reflected in her face, her eyes shone. She looked almost young again and beautiful. He sat on the high bed, and put his arm about her shoulder.

'Uummm,' he said affectionately, 'it *is* beautiful—like heaven.'

She said, 'It's a marvellous world—and I've had a big share in it.' She leaned her head against his arm, and they sat watching the sky already melting into gold, the trees alight with stars of gold and pink in every ice drop.

Christmas that year had been unusually gay and satisfactory. Christmas morning the house had rung with cries of 'Merry Christmas!' 'Christmas gift!' and shrieks of laughter. John had felt the warm surge of happiness he always felt when the house was teeming with people, being used to its utmost. Cousins and

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secluded maiden aunts and uncles emerged from all corners of the state, and from the stables to the parlour the house was alive and gay. Jennifer was lifted into the surrey and taken to church, where, surrounded by her kith and kin for several pews backward and forward, she thanked her God fervently that life had been so good.

Once home again, she was laid on the huge bed to rest until dinner time, when the family would gather around a groaning table and small ones would be set about the room and out into the hall to accommodate the children. Lutie brought her treasures, and the infant, Ran, was allowed to lie on the bed and bubble and coo, and stare at the fire which roared on the hearth.

All that week was full of colour and life and movement—the sort of thing that Jennifer throve on.

One morning, a day or so after Dorothy had gone back to school and the other visiting members of the family had gone home, Tremont came into Jennifer's room as he always did in the early morning to wash and shave. She smiled at him from the pillow and he made some casual remark. A little later he asked her a question and she did not answer. Something about her stillness made him go and lean over her.

His cry brought Sibby, hastily tying her house wrapper about her. Aghast and incredulous, they stood and stared at her. Her great dark eyes were open but unseeing.

Sibby gave an anguished moan and fell on her knees, clutching at the bedcovers. Her wail was only partly smothered by the bedding as she rocked and sobbed, 'She gone, Mars' John, she gone from us! She gone—she daid! Mah sweet Miss Jenny daid!'

John moved to the rocker by the fire and sank into it, covering his face with his hands. He could feel little, only a dull sensation as though he had been winded, and he was seized with a terrible trembling he could not stop.

The door was flung open, and Chloe, breathless from her climb from the kitchen, cried, 'Sibby! Whacher sayin'? Doan tell

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me—O Gawd, my po' lamb! O Gawd! Mars' John, po' soul! She gone, Mars' John! O Gawd! O Gawd, hab mussy on us!'

Her sobs and cries roused the household, and John, rising, stumbled blindly to his office, and began mechanically to put on his clothes. Jonah found him there, grey and shaking, and held his grandfather's head when he was suddenly ill. The house sprang into chaotic life with people running and sobbing, giving orders and praying. Jonah led his grandfather upstairs and came down again to stand shaking in the hall and pour himself a stiff drink. He mixed a whiskey and soda and carried it to John, lying white and in a violent chill on Jonah's bed. Jonah covered him with quilts, forced the whiskey down him, and sat beside him trying to quell his own grief.

Quieted, John said presently: 'She was happy, Jonah. She said she'd been happy. She was, don't you think, Jonah? She *was* happy?'

Jonah nodded, his throat closed and aching, his eyes hot with tears. He wanted to say something about its being another beautiful new dawn for Jennifer, but it sounded fatuous and untrue. He tried to speak, but the minute his lips parted he lost his self-control. Sobbing, he threw himself on the bed by his grandfather and together they cried, John murmuring, 'I'll miss her so! I'll miss her so! Jennifer! Jennifer!' and Jonah felt the comfort of his arms about his shoulders, the hotness of his own grief in his tears and in his heart.

That night, when Jennifer lay in her coffin in the little gold parlour, Tremont went to look at her. But there was none of his Jennifer there. He strode fiercely out of the house and went to pace under the giant, crackling trees. The ice was melting, its dripping sounded all around him, like exaggerated tears. The soft sliding of the ice from branches and of the broken twig made a whispering murmur. In them John could hear but one sound, the sound that beat in his own heart like a merciless wave—'Jennifer! Jennifer! Jennifer!'

PART

2

ISABEL

*'I have come a long way, I tell you.
I am attended . . . by motley
splendours.'*

DONALD DAVIDSON



CHAPTER TEN

AFTER the first shock of Jennifer's death had worn off, Isabel's imagination had leaped away from the present. Not only the thought of the distant but of the immediate future filled her with a sense of power and escape. For now she was the only woman of the household at Riverridge.

She had groomed herself for such a part so long, had trained herself in the house's ways and in the knowledge of the habits of its inmates, that now she felt little hesitancy at assuming the position of domestic head. Only Jennifer had not gone decently with her dying—she stayed in the house to hinder and harass this young interloper of whom she had been so fond. She was everywhere, Isabel thought, impatiently, with an aggravation that was born partly of an unwanted sense of loyalty toward Jennifer, a feeling of loss which she tried to smother, knowing that hardness was the only way for her, the path by which she would come to those things which, at Jennifer's own advice, she had decided on taking. Isabel was the only woman in the house, except when Lucile came on her daily distracted visits, but she was not alone. Jennifer was there in the very scent which hung in the rooms, in the piteous eyes of the servants, in every gesture which Tremont made, in the hush and sadness of the house itself.

Not only was Jennifer annoyingly omnipresent, but something that Lucile said that afternoon after the funeral made Isabel

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realize that, while she had groomed herself for a part, she had not thought to prepare others for it. To herself she was the feminine head of Riverridge—to everyone else she was a demure young girl capable perhaps of serving tea or doing embroidery—certainly not of managing a complicated *ménage*.

A few days after the funeral, Lucile, sitting pale and red-eyed in the library where a desolated Fount had brought tea, had said in an anxious tone, 'I suppose now that we must find someone to stay here—after all, we can't expect you to be alone here all day.'

And Isabel, feeling a little tingle of apprehension along her brow, had looked up over her cup and answered, 'But I'm *not* alone. The house is full of servants, Mr. Tremont's here—in and out—all day, and Jonah's here for the week-ends.'

(*'She wants me to leave—she wants me to say that of course I'll go away now!'* thought the girl in a cold panic. *'But I won't go, I can't! I've no place to go!'*)

'But—people might talk,' said Lucile, embarrassed and miserable. There was something in this girl's cool and adult appraisal of her that made everything she said sound fatuous and unnecessary. 'After all, you're a young girl, pretty—and with nothing but men in the house.'

For a second anger flared in Isabel's eyes before she dropped them demurely. (*'Pretty!'* she thought furiously—*'I'm beautiful! But does she think because of that—that "they" think her father or Jonah will seduce me? Does she think I haven't listened to hotel gossip since I was weaned, and that I don't yet know what she and her filthy "people" will say? Surely she doesn't believe anything like that! She's just jealous of my being here at Riverridge. Well, she left it. I can't help it if she wishes she hadn't!'*)

She looked up at Lucile, her eyes under perfect control now, and said piteously, 'I couldn't make trouble. I shall just go away.' She set the cup down and rose slowly, dejectedly, nothing in her drooping movements to let the other woman know that her mind was working furiously.

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(*'I'll never go!*' she was thinking fiercely. *'I'll cry and they'll never send me away. Let her send her old chaperones, a dozen of them! I can take care of them when they come.'*)

'I'll just—go—away,' she repeated falteringly.

'Oh, no, my dear!' cried Lucile, genuinely distressed. 'You can't do that. In the first place, Mamma made me promise that I would see that you stayed here as long as you wished. And in the second place——' Lucile hesitated, and the colouring which came so easily to her rather sallow face suffused it. 'You—you don't want to go home again, do you?'

'No, I have no place to go,' said Isabel, agreeing with Lucile's unspoken thought. 'But I'll find one.'

She smiled bravely, and Lucile, setting her own cup down with a clatter, rose and put her arm around her.

'My dear! You mustn't *think* of leaving Riverridge! Why, Mamma—would never forgive me if she knew!' Lucile's chin quivered, and, overcome with the strain of the last few days, the frustration of losing a mother she had never been able to understand and mortification at having driven a guest to suggest leaving her father's house, Lucile clung to Isabel and sobbed hotly on to her shoulder. 'Promise me you won't ever say such a thing again!'

And Isabel, smiling into Lucile's psyche knot of dark hair, had said, 'If you don't want me to, of course, I won't, Lucile.'

She had never called her 'Lucile' before, and strangely enough it now seemed as if by doing so she was conferring a favour on the older woman. Lucile kissed her; they had a fresh cup of tea, and as they parted they agreed that it would be a good thing to look into the question of an older woman. Isabel, smiling ironically, planned that long before such a person was found she would herself be well established as the domestic head of the house.

That night she unwound the long braids of her hair and had Jinny try various arrangements of the newest hair-do, with a magazine propped against a pile of books on one end of the

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bureau and the room's three lamps all lighted and set about at strategic places. They were trying to achieve a pompadour which went all around the head in a crinkled halo with the ends of the hair wound into complicated coils on the wearer's top, like a crocheted table doily.

Jinny, delighted at this new game, combed and pinned and combed out her handiwork again with grinning patience.

'You ain't got enough stuffin' in it,' she said when, after three attempts, Isabel had expressed dissatisfaction. 'You needs a rat like Miss 'Cile-weah in hers. Else you needs ter ruff it up—ter mek it stan' out. It's long ernuff, lawzee, yeah, but it oughter be scruffed up some.'

'Well, scruff it up, then!' said Isabel impatiently. 'I'll get a rat next time we go to town.'

Jinny held the long yellow strands perpendicular with one hand and with the other combed downward on the inner side so that the fine gold hairs were roughened and when the lock was lifted and curved into a smooth pompadour, the 'scruffed-up' hair underneath held it in shape.

'There!' Isabel said, smiling at her reflection in the lamplight. 'Give me the mirror, I want to see the back.'

'I'll wear it that way from now on,' she pronounced, and added, 'That's all, Jinny, but tell Chloe, if she's up when you go by her room, that I shall want breakfast with Mr. Tremont in the morning—and every morning.'

'You mean you goner git up an' eat at de table—dat time o' day? Ain't none o' de white ladies at Riverridge ever got up ter breakfas', Miss Isabel.'

'This one will,' said Isabel. 'I'm not sick—there's nothing the matter with me, and I think Mr. Tremont needs somebody with him now. He's so terribly lonely,' she added, watching Jinny, who melted, as she had expected her to, at these words.

'He got Mistuh Jonah,' said the coloured girl uncertainly. 'But mebbe yo' rat. Mebbe he do need somebody else.'

She backed out of the room with her eyes fixed on Isabel as if

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there were something strange about the blonde young woman which was bothersome and not quite clear to her. In the hall she shook her head and muttered, 'White folks sho is crazy—gittin' up when dey kin lay in de baid!'

The next morning Tremont, returning from his usual inspection of the place, found Chloe sitting in his office, a look of embarrassed determination on her face.

'Why, good morning, Chloe,' he said in surprise. 'Is something wrong?'

'Nawsir, ain't nothin' 'zactly wrong,' said Chloe, rising as he came in. 'I jes' wants t' tell you I'se leavin'.'

'Leaving? You mean you're leaving Riverridge—for good? Why, what on earth's the matter?' Tremont's mind flew to Isabel and he wondered if in her inexperience she had offended the old woman.

'Why, you've been here—let's see—over thirty years, haven't you?'

'I sholy has, Marse John,' said Chloe hastily. 'An' dat's de ver' reason I'se quittin' now. I'se about broke down, an' dat's de truf, Marse John. Whilst Miss Jenny was alive, I wouldn't 'a' lef'—it would 'a' upsot her so. But I'se saved me a little, an' my brother down in Gawgia, his wife done die an' leave him wid a parcel o' young uns ter raise. He want me ter come stay wid him awhile——'

'Won't raising a parcel of young ones be harder than cooking here for two or three people?' asked Tremont, who hated change.

'Dey ain't so small, an' dey's rale nice chillun. I sees 'em ever' summer or so when I goes on mah vacation. I craves ter jest set me down awhile, Marse John—I'se gittin' on an' my feets hurts me so bad!'

'Poor Chloe,' said John, smiling. 'Well—I guess there's nothing for us to do but to let you go and wish you good luck. When do you plan to leave?'

'My brother's comin' fo' me termorrer,' said Chloe, and John thought how secretive Negroes were, how they handled their

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white folks as though they were children. All her plans had been long since made when she came to ask his permission to leave!

'What will we do for a cook?' he asked, trying not to resent all this.

'Delia goner cook. Now the fambly ain't so big, she kin manage, an' dat Jinny—she ain't got ernuff ter do jes' tendin' Miss Isabel. She kin help in de dinin'-room when dey's company.'

Tremont turned back to his desk.

'I see you have it all worked out,' he said, laughing ruefully. 'Well, good luck to you. Stop by here in the morning and I'll have a little farewell present for you. After all, thirty years of your fried chicken, biscuits, and apple pie deserve some bonus. We'll just have to be grateful for the years we did have you, Chloe, and not grudge you your rest.'

The old Negro woman looked down a moment and when she raised her head her eyes were wet.

'Thank you, Marse John. You know—if Miss Jenny had 'a' been livin', I would 'a' stayed rat on.'

He bowed, without saying anything, and she turned with surprising swiftness. A moment later she was gone.

John walked to the window and looked out, pondering on her last words. Was it some subtle hint that Isabel was disliked by the Negroes? Or was it simply Chloe's way of saying that she had stayed on longer than she might have, because of Jennifer? He sighed and turned back to his desk, seating himself before a ledger. A few moments later he was absorbed in its rows of figures.

Down in the kitchen Chloe had resumed her customary arrogance.

'I'se leavin',' she announced to Fount. 'I done tole Marse John—I ain't takin' no orders from no rat young gal—no Yankee gal, no-ways!'

'Who goner cook?' asked Fount, pausing in picking the chicken he held between his knees. 'Not me!'

'Delia goner cook—from ternight on. An' dat Jinny kin help

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fer company. Wastin' her time playin' roun' wid dat white gal! She puttin' on airs. She didn't hab no pussonel maid up *yonder*—dere ain't enuff coloured folks ter go 'roun' up dere fer dat!'

Chloe's departure was more of a blow to Isabel than to John. Like him, she disliked any interruption of the old ways, but her reasons were different. John's first thought had been that Chloe was unhappy, his second that her going made a break in the house's personnel and habits—another link with the past broken.

Isabel felt, first, that she had failed to keep the place together, that Chloe's leaving was a defiance, perhaps the first sign of a crumbling of the old ease at Riverridge. She tried to keep any disruption from Tremont, hoping that she could make the place run with the same effortless grace which Jennifer had always managed. But it put a strain on her, and there were days when she wondered miserably if her ambitions did not outrun her strength.

Added to Chloe's defection had been the incomprehensible behaviour of Sibby. Sibby, who had been Jennifer's staff and prop, after the necessary last services for her old mistress were accomplished, had taken quietly but stubbornly to her bed and announced that, having nothing to live for, she had laid her down to die. Tremont had gone down to her cabin and talked with her; Chloe that first week had sent chicken soup, thick and nourishing, jellies and tempting tidbits like fried tripe and stewed backbone, but nothing had aroused her interest in living. Old Pompey had even resorted to the magic of his ancestors and worked what charms he knew to revive a fainting heart; but Sibby, clothed in an immaculate white ruffled gown, lay back on her snowy bed and stared at the things which through the years of long service she had gathered about her, and made no response. Jonah had persuaded Isabel to go down with him, one day in February, a day when the sun poured warm on the frozen earth, and the trilling of some foolish wren shouted that spring would surely come again. He had told Sibby to listen to that bird,

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telling her to get up, and he had pleaded that Isabel needed her. Isabel stood silent and ill at ease, while a dozen black eyes stared curiously at her paleness, and mumbled that Sibby must get well. But Sibby had looked hard at her and said to Jonah: 'Missee don' need ol' Sibby. Missee goner go a long way by herse'f. She goner hab t'ings—no *matter* whut. *T'ings*—dat what missee lak bes'—dat whut she goner hab.' And then she had looked at Jonah a moment, a long, sweet gaze of utter devotion and had said, 'G'bye, sweet boy. You wuz Miss Jenny's fav'rite.' She closed her eyes then, and after an awkward silence Jonah took her hand in his, shaking it gently. 'Good-bye, Sibby—I'll see you later.'

And Sibby had smiled, a gentle, indulgent smile and answered almost inaudibly, 'In de bye-and-bye, Jo, boy. Sweet Chariot comin' fer Sibby—soon.'

That night she died, lying peacefully on her bed while loving black hands tended the fire on the whitewashed hearth and loving ears listened fearfully for the sound of the 'chariot' swinging low for Sibby to go home to Miss Jenny and her Marster.

Since Luther Perry had settled into chronic invalidism, Ward found time to come to see Isabel frequently. His courtship flattered and pleased her, for he was suave and persuasive, and his good looks, as yet only slightly dimmed by dissipation, gave her a satisfaction that was not purely æsthetic. He had none of Evan's mischievous allure, but he was an experienced lover and he threw everything that he had into impressing her. His attentions, too, came at a most welcome time and served to lighten the days of intensive domesticity and mourning at Riverridge.

Nevertheless, Isabel had remained elusive and non-committal. Everything she had heard made her know that Riverridge was one of the loveliest, probably the choicest, place in the neighbourhood, and she had no intention of encouraging Ward until she had seen Fairhaven and decided whether she wished to be mistress of it. Jennifer had died before she had had a chance to

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speak to Isabel about the Perrys' finances, but Isabel needed little guidance when it came to material interests. Because of Jennifer's confinement, Luther and Virginia Perry had done the calling, and until two months after Jennifer's death Isabel had no opportunity to see Ward's home.

But one day in late February, when the air was full of the fragrance of new-ploughed fields and the ineffable, sweet, lemony odour of early jonquils, John was preparing to drive over and see Luther Perry. He had made a weekly visit to his old friend ever since Luther had been stricken, but today, passing through the hall, he saw Isabel standing at the library window. Something in the dejection of her attitude made him pause. He was suddenly aware that she would be alone in the house—must often, for long tedious hours, be here with no diversion except the arduous responsibility of a housekeeper. He wondered, fleetingly, if Lucile had done anything further about a companion for Isabel, and then on an impulse stopped at the library door.

'You look very dreary there,' he said, smiling at her. 'Why don't you get your wraps and drive over to Fairhaven with me? It's almost like spring out, although the wind is cold—so get a warm coat. Fount's bringing the buggy,' he added, as her face lighted with pleasure and excitement at the suggestion. He strode out, thinking guiltily that she must be bored and lonely indeed if a short drive to see an ill old man could give her such delight.

Isabel ran upstairs so hurriedly that her heart was pounding when she reached her room. But it was not only with haste. This, she realized, was a momentous occasion; it might be the turning-point in her life. She looked at her reflection in the mirror as she patted the impeccable pompadour and retied the minute velvet bow in the collar of her shirtwaist.

The fur jacket and hat in which she had had her picture taken for Dorothy, her gloves, a dash of cologne on her handkerchief—and she was ready. She stopped a moment at the door, looking back over the comfortable and now familiar room where the fire-

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light leaped on ceiling and wall and the cold spring sunshine fell in bars through the shutters. Then, smiling and with a quick breath of pleasure, she turned and ran down the stairs.

Tremont, waiting on the porch for Isabel, noted that the thick masses of January jasmine were starred with their bright yellow blossoms and that the air was overpoweringly sweet with winter honeysuckle. For an instant he suffered one of the sudden waves of longing which he was beginning to dread and to seek to avoid. His lids stung with quick tears and he turned and looked back at the door, wishing that Isabel would come quickly and break the mood. As if in answer to his need, she flung the door open and smiled warmly at him.

'Oh, it's lovely out, isn't it?' she exclaimed as he took her arm. 'Uumm, *smell!* And look! What's that pink thing over there—by the edge of the fields?'

He leaned nearer to see the peach tree she was asking about and the fragrance of her cologne rose warm and more redolent than the honeysuckle. Her laughing face, the sun on the sleek fur of her jacket, the feeling of a new beginning which the spring freshness epitomized, magically dispersed Tremont's sadness. They both felt light with happiness when he helped her into the buggy.

The road was damp and little clods of red earth were flung up from the mare's hooves, as the buggy spun along. The two hounds followed them part of the way, making forages into the wood and the fields, scaring young rabbits and loping away with hysterical cries of delight. Everywhere there was the smell of spring and the sound of birds.

Intense excitement grew within her as Isabel, searching each place they approached, wondered if this were Fairhaven. But they had driven almost half an hour when Tremont pulled the mare to a stop at a stone gate and deftly turned the buggy within.

Isabel's instant reaction was disappointment. The house, low and sprawling and badly in need of paint, lay on a rise at the end of a curving drive, surrounded by cedars and evergreens which

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gave it a dark and shabby look. The lawn which swept down to the road was dotted with bare trees, and was unkempt and neglected. To the left and right the fields lay unploughed, filled with stubble and weeds. As the buggy moved slowly up the drive, an Irish setter and three beagles ran out and barked at them.

Isabel lost her footing as she climbed out of the buggy because she was so occupied with trying to take in every detail of the place. Tremont, frightened, caught her and stood her safely on the ground.

Across the front of the house ran a wide porch with square columns. It was muddy with dog tracks and between two of the floor-boards was a tuft of brown hair where the setter had obviously been scratching his back. A wooden bench and two straight wooden lawn chairs stood on the porch and in one was a battered tin bucket.

Leaving the mare to nibble the dry grass, Tremont took Isabel's arm and walked across the yard to the dining-room door. He opened it without knocking and pushed Isabel in ahead of him.

She stood just inside, looking about her in distaste. There was a heavy odour of woodsmoke and grease from cooking in the room, whose gracious beauty was lost in a muddle of dust and dogs, half-washed dishes and a soiled tablecloth, chairs piled with hunting clothes and muddy boots by the fire. Two beagles struggled for the choice place by the logs, and out in the kitchen, across the little enclosed porch, Pink could be heard singing and rattling pans.

Tremont motioned Isabel to a chair. She noticed that he showed no surprise or distaste at the room's disarray as he opened a door into the hall and said, 'I'll get Virgie.' Men never noticed such things, she supposed. From the hall came a breath of stale cold air and Isabel was disgusted to see that on the hall rug lay a huge half-gnawed bone. There seemed to be dogs or the signs of dogs everywhere.

Somebody had dumped a saddle on the lovely old rose-coloured sofa in the hall. Wrinkling her nose with disgust, Isabel turned

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towards the hearth and held out her gloved hands. She pushed one of the beagles aside with her toe; it slumped over to the other end of the hearth, sighing exaggeratedly as it lifted brown reproachful eyes at her.

Someone came in at the hall door and Isabel looked up to see Ward staring at her incredulously. He was dressed in worn khaki pants and an old white sweater. Only for an instant was he without his usual poise, then, flinging his hat on the sofa with the saddle, he came into the dining-room with outstretched hands.

'Isabel!' he cried, taking her hands in his so that she felt the cold of his flesh through her thin gloves. 'How wonderful to find you here! Who brought you? Have you seen Mother? Here, sit down, I'm frozen to the marrow. *Pink!*' he roared in startling contrast to his tone towards Isabel. 'Bring us something to drink. What'll you have, Isabel—Scotch?'

'Heaven, no!' said Isabel, colouring slightly. 'I never drank anything in my life. Besides, I'm not a bit cold.'

'Scotch for me,' said Ward to Pink, who had come in and was bobbing and smiling. Isabel noticed that he wore no butler's coat, that his sleeves were rolled up as though he had been washing dishes, and that he looked none too clean. As the Negro hesitated, Ward said, 'Tea for Miss Page—make it good and strong; she's used to Miss Jennifer's.'

Isabel began to protest, but was interrupted by Mrs. Perry, who came in on a wave of dogs which eddied about her and flowed over the hearth and under the table. As they began to scramble between Isabel's feet to get to the fire, Virginia cried to Ward: 'Get these damned animals out of here! This place is a mad-house. Hello, my dear! How pretty you look! Dear me, you bring Jenny back to me so unbearably.'

Her grey eyes filled with tears and she gave Isabel a quick, tobacco-scented kiss, holding her on each side of her head and pushing the fur turban over one eye. Isabel, straightening the hat, stepped back while Virginia yelled '*Pink!*—where is that rascal?' Adding unnecessarily, 'He hasn't cleared the lunch

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things off! Since I'm shut up with Luther so much, everything goes to rack and ruin. I want some tea,' she added abruptly as an expression of pettishness came into her face for an instant.

'I've told Pink to bring some,' said Ward, taking her arm. 'Sit down, madame, you fret yourself too much.'

'And who'd get anything done around here if I didn't?' she asked, fumbling for her cigarettes. 'The servants all trucking off God-knows-where—or why. You having trouble over at your place?' Then she went on before Isabel could answer. 'No, I suppose not. Never heard of it at Riverridge—but here, for some unknown reason, they have all left in a bunch—all but Pink. He knows he can't get as much liquor or leisure and have as much foolishness put up with anywhere else as he can here.'

Isabel, glad to have something to talk about and eager for sympathy in her difficulty with Chloe, started to pour out her own troubles, but her natural caution won over the impulse. '*I don't want her to think I can't manage at Riverridge,*' she thought cannily, and began to discuss the drive over.

Ward, poking the fire, was thinking, '*How much we say that we don't mean, how our gabble covers our real thoughts and feelings.*' Surely his mother knew that the servants had left in a body because they had discovered that the months of back pay which Luther owed them could never be paid. And just as surely she knew that Pink would never leave permanently, no matter what his other shortcomings, because he loved Luther Perry as he loved nothing else on earth. Years ago when Pink had been an ingenuous and amusing little coloured boy somebody had thought it would be a joke to tell him that he could make a pair of water wings out of two large gourds, but had failed to tell him where to wear them. Some half-hour after Pink had gone to the river, Luther Perry, while riding by, had seen the two gourds on Pink's feet bobbing on the water. Perry had sprung from his horse and, with absolutely no thought of himself, had dashed into the river. He had swum out and dragged the gourds, with the unconscious little Negro under them, to the bank. Pink had tied the gourds

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securely about his ankles, with the inevitable result that his feet had gone up and his head down. By great good chance he had actually been in the water only a few moments when Luther Perry had made the rescue.

Perry had worked on the boy for fifteen minutes before the little fellow showed signs of life, and then had thrown him face down across his horse and carried him to the kitchen at Fairhaven. Here he had turned Pink over to Virginia and the horrified cook. Perry had then stalked into the living-room, thrashed with his riding-whip the astonished and frightened visitor responsible for the mishap, and thrown him bodily out of the front door. This last episode in the drama had endeared him to Pink even more than the rescue from death's dark river. 'Mistuh' Perry's wrath at the injury to one of his 'niggers' had become legendary, and Pink had grown up with an inordinate pride in Luther Perry's devotion to him.

Pink came in now carrying a tray which even Isabel had to admit was impeccable—tea, a fat pitcher of cream, sugar, and a silver basket of tea cakes.

'Bring two more cups,' said Virginia. 'I'll pour Miss Page's and take the tray into Mr. Perry's room.' She gave Ward a grotesquely arch look for which he could have choked her and said to Isabel, 'You'll excuse me, won't you? There is something I forgot to speak to John about.'

Ward set his glass on the mantel and sprang to take the tray from her as she turned to leave the room, having put the tea cakes on the table. But she motioned him aside with a wag of her head and went into the hall, kicking the door shut behind her. The tide of beagles and setters had flowed back and the dogs were settling furtively under the tables and as near the hearth as they dared.

For a long moment after she was gone, there was an awkward silence. Isabel, looking down, stirred her tea daintily, with a hand on which were traced the little lines of the recently removed glove, like the veins in a peach blossom. Ward stood by the

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mantel sipping his whiskey, staring at the top of the little fur hat, the glint of firelight on the pale pompadour, and the way her long lashes made shadows on her cheeks. Although he could not know that it was by the simple expedient of a pompadour, he realized that suddenly she had ceased to be a girl and was a poised and beautiful woman. Ward was overcome with adoration for her, and thought as emotionally as a seventeen-year-old boy of how wonderful it was to have her here in his house sitting so intimately by the hearth.

Isabel's mind was full of disturbing thoughts. She sensed the emotion in the atmosphere and knew that Ward was watching her. It was one of those situations, known to any attractive woman, in which, with the slightest encouragement, a man can be precipitated into a love scene. But suddenly that was the last thing on earth that Isabel wanted from Ward. Something like panic assailed her, and she was still. She was almost afraid to move and sat sipping her tea as if, should she lift her elbow too high, raise her eyes or shift her feet, the house would come tumbling down about her ears. She was chagrined to think that had this tête-à-tête taken place in the quiet beauty of Riverridge, if Ward had not smelled faintly of the stables, if the grime and disorder of the house had not been the flagrant symbols of inner poverty and decay, she could have savoured this romantic moment. As it was she had only one desire, and that was that Tremont would end his visit quickly. For herself, there was no more business here; she had wiped Ward from her list of prospects as cleanly as if he had been a strange beggar in a gutter.

Ward set his empty glass on the mantel and moved towards her. 'You'll be too warm, sitting there in your coat,' he said. 'Let me help you take it off.'

'Oh, we can't stay long!' she cried, lifting her eyes—you really can't snatch a woman's coat off while she has a cup of tea in one hand and a saucer in the other. 'Mr. Tremont said he could only stay a few moments. He had to see a man about buying a horse—or something.'

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'He did?' Ward pulled at the neck of his sweater and an expression which Isabel could not fathom crossed his face.

'Yes. I—I think I should go in and remind him,' she said with relief. 'The tea was nice, thank you.' She stood up and set the cup on the soiled table. The beagle rolled over on its back and looked at her with languishing eyes. Ward, glancing quickly at the door, stepped forward and took her in his arms.

'Don't go!' he said urgently. 'You've never been to see me before. You can't go now and leave me. God, Isabel, I *love* you! Don't you know it? Don't try to pull away from me—what are you afraid of here with everybody in the house?'

His face was so close to hers that she could see the tiny red veins in his eyeballs, smell the whiskey on his breath. His arms were hard about her, but the look in his eyes was beseeching rather than commanding. She suddenly saw his good looks as weak and florid and hoped that her distaste did not show in her own face. She tried to maintain demureness while struggling frantically and said, 'Oh, please, Ward, that's what I *am* afraid of! Suppose someone came in—I'd be mortified—embarrassed to death!' She laughed, hoping to keep a light touch to the end.

'You needn't be mortified.' He kissed her hotly full upon the lips and she shivered with disgust. 'I'm asking you to marry me. Darling—don't say you won't. Say you'll——'

The sound of the bedroom door opening gave impetus to Isabel's panic. She pushed him from her fiercely and said, trying to make the set grin on her face into a semblance of maidenly sweetness, 'Not now, *please*, Ward! Some other time. I—I—have to think.'

'I've frightened you!' he said remorsefully, with a gentleness which moved her in spite of herself. She pulled on her gloves and lifted her face.

'Kiss me,' she said, 'quickly.' And as he bent and kissed her with his old courtliness, she felt, to her dismay, tears of pity well hotly under her closed lids. Poor Ward! He did not know that he was kissing her good-bye.

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On the way home both Tremont and Isabel were silent. The sun set over the new-ploughed fields with a ruddy, cold light, and Isabel nestled into her fur collar gratefully. Tremont, remembering Fairhaven when it had been a happy place, alive with guests and many servants, the happiest rendezvous of dog and horse trainers from all over the state, thought of the present shabbiness and of Ward's lone mare, and sank into melancholy.

Isabel's mood was a mixture of disappointment and relief—disappointment in Ward's state of affairs which automatically removed him from her favour, and relief that she had escaped a trap into which she might so easily have been lured by his good looks and charming manners. The promises and boastings he had frequently made when they were together she now saw were childish and empty.

Her sense of liberation was so intense and her gratitude for Riverridge's protection so keen that she was moved to a rare impulsiveness. As they turned in at the gate of the drive she said fervently, 'Now I am coming home.'

Tremont looked at her in surprise and with swift tenderness laid his hand on hers.

'That's a very nice thing to say,' he said, smiling down at her. 'I hope it will be your home for many, many years. You were good to come with me this afternoon. I feel very sad about my old friends.'

She said nothing, but when, a few moments later, he lifted her from the buggy, she laid a cheek against his for an instant so brief that it might have been accidental. But the contact moved him, as she meant it to. He breathed again the heady fragrance of her cologne and felt for a moment the press of her body, warm and clinging against his own.

'She's a sweet child,' he thought, and knew even as the words passed through his mind that they were false, that it was not because she was a child that the scent and touch of her were good to him. He stood, bewildered and concerned, and watched her mount the steps, her head beneath the little fur turban

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bent thoughtfully, her gloved hand gripping the dark serge skirt.

Still pondering this revelation, and his own reaction, which shocked him, he led the mare to the rear of the house and unhitched her himself. He spent a good while currying her and even got out the feed and stood awhile listening to her chew on the oats.

When at last he went into the house, Jonah was there before the library fire talking to Isabel, who seemed as contained as ever.

Later that evening, while Jonah studied in his room, Isabel brought some sewing and sat in the lamplight while Tremont fetched his books from his chilly office and figured expenses by the fire. It was one of those domestic scenes which by unobtrusive manœuvrings Isabel managed to have take place frequently. If she were successful, they would occur again and again until they made a pattern which would be extremely upsetting to disturb.

As Tremont closed the books an hour later, he sighed and said, 'Poor Luther! It takes a lot of time and money to run places like this—not so much money, perhaps, as credit and commodities. And now old Luther's short of both.'

'Did he have plenty—once?' asked Isabel, and Tremont, obviously glad to have someone to talk to, began to tell her how the Perrys—between bad luck, betting, drink, and horseflesh—had lost everything that Luther had inherited or, in better days, had earned.

'It wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't owed a couple of men who had money invested in a coal and iron business. The thing failed last year; a lot of them went bankrupt and naturally they came down on the people who owed them. They've taken everything the old man had—and it's killed him.'

'Isn't there any chance of his coming back—rebuilding his fortune?'

'Not a Chinaman's. He never really had a "fortune." Had horses and dogs, a house—that was his father's place; Virginia

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had a little money, but they threw it away on races. If Ward was worth a damn he might stage a comeback—but he's not. Just a drunkard and a man-about-town. Putting on airs, hoping to marry some wealthy woman who'll take care of him the way Virginia has—— Bah! He's worse than useless!

Isabel wondered what Tremont would say if she told him that only that afternoon Ward had asked her, a penniless, friendless girl, to marry him. Perhaps he thought the Tremonts would stand by her. She laughed silently, thinking that he flattered her if he thought that after having taken her in for six or eight months the Tremonts would feel called upon to take care of her and a worthless husband. Perhaps Tremont did Ward an injustice in this one instance—perhaps Ward would even face poverty if he were really in love. Isabel remembered his kisses, recalling the smell of whiskey and the stable and the hard pressure of his moustache, the beseeching look in his eyes. Her own eyes became riveted on the fire and she sighed.

Tremont said, 'I shouldn't have worried you with my troubles. Come—it's time we went to bed.'

'It was no trouble,' she protested, folding her sewing and putting it away. 'I was terribly interested.' (Men always believed what you told them, she thought, remembering the precepts of the hotel-veranda gossips—'*You can do anything if what you say is always sweet and kind.*') And of course she had been interested. It was as well to know the worst—to be assured that Ward would never make a comeback. Then everything could end, with no left-overs of romance or sentiment—a clean, neat cut. Isabel was the 'soul of neatness.'

In the hall she poured Tremont's whiskey for him, not looking at him directly as she handed him the glass, not pushing this new intimacy, but doing the thing in an offhand fashion, as though this were an old, comfortable habit, one which he could depend upon.

He took the drink and sipped it tentatively, smiled with satisfaction, and watched her as she selected a pear for herself.

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'Good night, my dear,' he said warmly, and she answered, 'Good night.'

He turned to his office, where he still slept, feeling for the first time since Jennifer's death less lonely, more filled with that pleasant expectancy which warms us when there is even one person who is interested in our going out and our coming in.

Late in April, Luther Perry had another stroke, and from then on he lay either in a coma or shouting in delirium. Tremont, riding over one day, found Virginia in tears while Ward and Pink held the struggling Luther in bed. Even down at the gate his voice could be heard with amazing strength for one which all these weeks had been as frail and uncertain as the sputtering of the fire in the grate.

'I hates the glorious Union—
'Tis dripping with our blood.
I hates their striped banner—
I fought it all I could.

'O, I'm a grand old rebel,
Now that's just what I am.
For "This Fair Land o' Freedom"
I do not care a damn!'

'The grand old rebel,' repeated Tremont with tears in his own eyes. He stood with Virginia in the dining-room. The air was balmy and sweet with the fragrance of the earth. It seemed incredible that death could be so close. The beagles, aware that something was wrong, lay on the porch and watched the house with anxious eyes. Virginia sat near the empty hearth from sheer force of habit, and wiped her eyes.

'Can't they give him something to quiet him?' asked Tremont, pacing restlessly. 'Where's the doctor? Why doesn't he give him a hypodermic?'

'He's on his way now,' said Virginia. 'He's promised to put him completely to sleep. Even if—even if it means the end for Luther, even if his heart fails under it, it will be better than this. None of us can stand this much longer. He's going to go, any way——'

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She stopped and leaned her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably. Tremont went to her and sat on the arm of her chair. He put his arm around her and drew her to him, murmuring helplessly, 'Virgie! Virgie! Don't cry! Don't cry!'

But misery burned in his own heart like a living fire; the knowledge of his old friend's worries bore as heavily on him as the other's death. Luther would be out of it, but Virginia had the future to face with very little more than her worthless children to face it with her.

Late that afternoon, Luther Perry died, quietly and with a look of such utter peace on his round face that Virginia was resigned. Lucile came over and put her to bed, took charge of the house, and with her own servants set it to rights. Luther's room had been kept immaculate, the only pleasant spot in the dark old house, but there was much to be done there before the little old man, quiet for the first time since she had known him, lay dressed for burial on the big double bed.

Ward, shocked and weary, had taken a gargantuan drink and gone to sleep in the servants' quarters above the stables, which was as much help as he could have been anywhere, as it got him out from under foot and left all but the room where Virginia slept free to be turned out and cleaned.

Isabel, when Tremont had come again, that afternoon, had ridden over with him to help receive the friends and neighbours who brought consolation and food.

Ward was nowhere to be seen, for which Isabel was extremely grateful. She was sated with death and all its ceremonies, and she did not feel up to seeing Ward in a state of bereavement. He'd probably be drinking and even maudlin and she would find it difficult to repulse him and at the same time keep up an appearance of sympathy. The long three days before the burial dragged themselves out and were intolerable to her. It was the atmosphere of Riverridge all over again.

On coming home from Luther's funeral, Isabel looked at herself in the glass, after she had removed the black hat Lucile had

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lent her, and wondered why she was not mouldering. Outside, the May sunlight slanted over the grass and called to her in tempting contrast to the dim and silent interior of the house, which seemed to be shadowed permanently with death.

She went downstairs and out on to the wide porch, breathing deeply of the fresh breath of spring. The roses were beginning to bloom, masses of shell-pink and pale yellow on all the garden fences, the servant houses and walls of the place. Everywhere she turned were splashes of colour. The first fans on the mimosa were opening like tiny green fingers, and under the new-leaved oak and maple trees the grass was lush and shining like green silk. From the woods the soft evening wind brought the sweetness of wild azalea, and over everything lay an ineffable freshness that stirred her to a vague longing for something to break the gloomy tediousness of the present.

Down on the road there were sudden sharp hoofbeats and Isabel turned indifferently to see the rider. He came in at the gate and she heard the sound of the horse's hooves on the stock gap. The leafy trees hid him from her except for glimpses, and it was several seconds before she recognized Ward Perry. Even while she wondered how difficult his mood might be, she welcomed his presence. He would at least be somebody to talk to, somebody with whom to share the soft beauty of the afternoon.

She saw, when he flung himself from his mare at the foot of the steps, that he was drunker than she had ever seen him. His face was flushed and he moved with a jerkiness that was not characteristic of him. Yet even now he maintained the attitude of courtliness; and as his feet touched the ground and he steadied himself with one hand on the mare's sweating shoulder, he swept off his hat and bowed.

There was something sardonic in the gesture, and Isabel thought, 'I wish he hadn't come. He's going to be disagreeable.' She wondered why she thought that, as he had never been anything but chivalrous towards her, but then he had never been so reeling drunk.

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She stood at the top of the steps watching him weave upward, and when he had safely achieved the porch she moved towards the chairs and sat down, regarding him appraisingly.

'Sit down, Ward,' she said, hoping to spare him the humiliation of a sprawl. 'It's so nice out here—everything's sweet and cool.'

'Like you,' he said heavily, falling into the chair next to her and leaning over so that she smelled the whiskey thick on his breath. 'Schweet—but cool—damn' cool.'

She frowned and he leaned back, staring out over the sunny lawn. The sun was lowering now and the light washed over the porch in a pale golden wave.

('It must have been like this just before I came to Riverridge,' she thought with detachment. 'I've been here almost a year.')

'I thought your sisters were beautiful,' she said. The Perry brood had shown up for the funeral—four of them, dark and wild-looking, all handsome in their various ways, all living far beyond their means, all 'faster'n' greased lightning' the neighbours had said.

Ward reached clumsily for his handkerchief and wiped his steamy face. 'You wouldn' like 'em,' he said thickly. 'You're too cold. You're too care-ful.' He spoke as if measuring each syllable, the deliberateness of a man very drunk.

'You're cooler'n a snake, and careful.' He sat with his chin on his chest and thought this over. The handkerchief trailed from his limp hand. Isabel stared at him, disgusted, but still reluctantly fascinated by his good looks, the fine shape of his head, the intense brownness of his hair and moustache—which were not black nor red, but a rich, glossy brown. His hand, hanging from the wilted white cuff and cream-coloured sleeve, had a slender beauty that was almost dainty; but his face, flushed and puffed, showed what the man would look like five or ten years from then, and Isabel turned away, repelled.

He drew himself up in his chair with a great effort, waving the handkerchief in front of his face with a feeble attempt to cool himself off. His eyes lit with a sudden evil mirth and he said

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insinuatingly, 'You oughter be more careful'n you are—livin' here with ol' Tremont. Maybe you aren't s' cold, after all—eh?'

She was furious. No one had ever spoken to her so before and it humiliated as well as shocked her that Ward, of all people, should do so now. She stood up, trembling partly with rage and partly because she was afraid of him.

'You'd better leave,' she said breathlessly. 'I think you're not yourself. Besides, your place is with your mother today, it seems to me.'

Ward looked at her for a long moment as if trying to remember who she was. It was conspicuously quiet except for the sound of someone calling the chickens in the rear of the house and a far, faint barking of a dog. The breeze blew her hair in fine wisps against her cheek. She put up her hand to hold it back with a grave, careful movement and Ward laughed.

'Miss Page!' he said, leaning near her. He had risen as she had and suddenly he seemed to tower and spread over her like a black cloud. She wished Fount would come out or Tremont—or even Jonah, she thought nervously.

'Schweet an' cool. Ver-ry pritty! No wonder ol' Tremont likes to keep you to himse'f. Ver-ry nice.'

He belched and she turned scarlet. Suddenly she struck him across the face as hard as she could. At the same moment she felt an irresistible desire to cry. Ward had staggered back against the porch railing and put his hand to his cheek, staring at her incredulously. She pushed past him and walked to the door, trying with every ounce of her self-control to keep her dignity until she would be inside. But just as she laid her hand on the screen door-knob, he lurched towards her and grasped her arm.

'Wanna fight, huh?' he asked thickly. 'Doan wan' me t' make love t' you. Won' marry me, huh? Rather be Tremont's gal. Pret-ty nice——' He glanced up at the house, white and quiet in the delicate spring sunset. 'Feathered your nes'—hmm? You're too good for Wardie—I know,' he added with sudden

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ferocity. 'Wardie's poor. Poor'n a church mouse, or somepin' like that. You're a stuck-up snob—all full of f-feathers!'

Suddenly Isabel began to laugh. Her anger left as quickly as it had arisen. Ward's solemn head-wagging, combined with his words, were more than she could bear. She threw her head back and laughed uncontrollably, peal after peal.

Ward's face paled perceptibly. His mouth hardened into a line under his short moustache. His eyes narrowed and he took a careful step toward her.

Slowly, as though he were going to caress her, he laid a hand on each shoulder and then tightened the grip. He began to shake her backward and forward so that her head snapped until she was dizzy.

'Stop! Stop!' she cried between gales, fending him off weakly. '*Stop!* You're *hurting* me!' Her laughter ceased as suddenly as it had begun. She struggled, twisting and pulling to get out of that maddening grasp. But he held on, still shaking her, no matter how she turned, until angry and terrified she screamed at the top of her voice, 'Help! Jonah! Fount! Help!'

'Call ol' Tremont!' panted Ward. 'Call him an' his feathers—he's the one. Call him!'

And Tremont it was who came, running and aghast. He had heard her first wild peals of laughter and had come from his office, curious that Isabel should feel moved to hilarity knowing how the others in the house felt about Luther Perry. He had stood a moment in the shadowed library, with his head bent, puzzled and hurt, and then he had heard her first terrified cry. He was there now tearing Ward's hot, slippery hands away, his face paper-white and angry. Once Ward was free, Tremont stepped back. With a feeling of exaltation and release he swung back a hard fist. Ward stood near the edge of the top step and Tremont's blow caught him off balance. He staggered, flailed his arms wildly for a moment, and went down, slithering over the steps with a dull rumble, so that Isabel hid her face in her hands and moaned.

Tremont went to her and put his arms around her, murmuring:

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'My dear, my dear! That you should have had such an experience! Come inside and forget it. Ward's not himself, and Heaven knows that's not surprising. He's had a long hard vigil and he has only one resource. This time he had put too much dependence in it.'

Fount's anxious face appeared at the screen and Tremont led Isabel inside, saying sharply, 'Get Mr. Perry's horse and see him off the place.'

Jonah, limping hurriedly down the stairs, came forward and said, 'What's the matter? Is she hurt? What can I do?'

'She's been frightened—that damned Ward's drunker'n' a coot, trying to kill her apparently. Get her some sherry.'

He sat Isabel down on the sofa in the hall and Jonah went to the table, pouring sherry into a small glass. Isabel was now genuinely unstrung, and it was some time before they could get her to swallow the drink. Before she could calm down, Tremont sent Jonah to his office to dip a towel in cold water to bathe her temples, and while Jonah was gone he held her close, murmuring to her tenderly as he would have to Lutie or Dorothy.

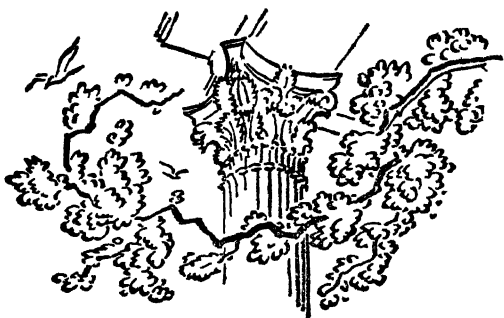
The three at the table that night were unusually silent. Tremont was depressed over the loss of his friend and over Ward's behaviour. He pitied him in one way and hoped that no breath of this escapade would get back to bother and humiliate poor Virginia.

Jonah was sunk in self-disgust. Why hadn't he been the one to knock Ward down the steps? He was always too early or too late, and while he was not in love with Isabel, now that Evan was not there he could at least appear in a better light. He had bungled one of the few opportunities he had had for making an impression on her. Her tears and the sherry had given her an unusual flush and although she had gone to her room to brush the tumbled hair, the dampness in the air or the first real warmth of spring had made it curl. Little tendrils, gold in the candlelight, rimmed her face and gave her a softly appealing look. She sat eating little, with eyes downcast. Jonah was fascinated by her incredible beauty

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and wondered if it were her very perfection, which made her still unreal to him.

As for Isabel, her one thought was that she had met with an experience which she had not been able to handle. The self-confidence which she had built up as mistress of Riverridge had received an almost mortal blow. She was worn out physically and spiritually, and shortly after dessert was served asked to be excused. She went to her room, where she lay fully dressed on the bed and tried to take stock of herself.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

VIRGINIA PERRY sat at her desk in the big bedroom which she and Luther had shared for nearly fifty years and stared at the litter of notes and telegrams on it. She was sick of the house, sick of winter, and sick of the thought of maybe more than ten years in a world without Luther.

She turned and looked out of the window where the spring's green was breaking out on every living branch, and she sighed gustily. The Irish setter, lying at her feet, got up and laid his head on her knee, gazing at her with sympathetic, questioning eyes. She took the big silky ear between her finger and thumb and began to stroke it unconsciously. Her hand slid over the dog's fine bony head and touched his cold nose. He licked her and wriggled with muted ecstasy, hoping to charm her from her downcast mood.

Suddenly a mild claustrophobia seized her. She hadn't been out of the house since Luther's death and she had a sharp impulse to get on the earth, to smell the freshness and the sweetness of spring.

'Let's go, old boy,' she said, getting up so quickly that the dog was thrown back on his haunches to avoid being stepped on. 'Let's go for a walk. Wanter go?'

The setter leaped and barked and began to run around the room in circles, crouching and wriggling like a six-months-old pup.

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She laughed a little at his foolishness, but almost at once her face fell into lines of intense sadness. Her eyes became abstract as though she had shut from her mind every vestige of personal feeling. In the closet where she reached for the army hat and the old grey sweater she wore to tramp the fields, there was a desolate emptiness where once Luther's ample clothes had hung. She shut the door quickly and put on the hat, yanking the wadded gloves out of the sweater pocket as she went into the hall. From the dining-room she called to Pink that she was going for a walk and to tell Mr. Ward not to worry about her; she wouldn't be late.

Pink, depressed by the unnatural quietness of her voice, replied 'Wellum,' and went to the kitchen window to watch her move across the lawn. When he turned back to the sink the silence of the house pressed on him. It was the first time he had been alone there since Luther's death. Already a ghostly emptiness seemed to have seized the place. Hastily scraping the remains of the scrambled eggs from the skillet he had been cooking his lunch in, he filled it with water and set it in the oven where it would not be noticed. From behind the flour barrel he drew a flask of whiskey. He threw a dish-towel over the stack of undried dishes on the drain-board, pulled the kitchen shade down to a few inches above the window sill, and slipped out of the house. Back of the stable in the warm afternoon sun there was a pile of hay. A man and a pipe and a bottle could pass a right comfortable afternoon there if he were so minded.

Virginia walked through the green garden, not seeing the plants she had tended for so many years with a sort of careless maternalism, and struck out across the fields, on a narrow zigzag path. Two men and two liver-spotted pups came into view farther afield. How many times she had seen them there and Luther with them, dressed as these men were in boots and hunting-jackets, making the same boastful gestures, loping along with the same eager contentment! Men and dogs—! She'd have to get used to the sight of them, learn not to look for one stocky figure, learn to

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control that quick stabbing catch in her breast which came at the thought of all this dearness and good companionship now lost forever.

She wondered how Tremont was bearing it, and thought, *'It's worse for old men. We women have our children and grandchildren, our houses to run, but an old man bereft always seems forlorn.'*

She turned towards Riverridge with some vague thought of seeing him, moving ahead with the sturdy, dogged strides of a person who has walked long distances all her life.

But she didn't go to Riverridge. At the cross-roads she stopped at the store for some matches. The weathered grey frame building sat high off the ground. Under it, among the collection of bottles and old oil tins, tomato cans and cast-off bits of harness, dust and broken bottles, the dogs of the customers lolled and awaited their masters' leave-taking. Hours might pass before Jed Simpson or Red Tolliver, 'Bait' Wilson or Tom Bates, left the store, once they had dragged their shiftless lengths up its rickety set of steps. A checker game, a local scandal, a political or philosophical argument, a tall tale of fishing or hunting or the prospective purchase of another skinny hound, could occupy them for half a day. They sat on the sills of the big windows in summer, slapping flies and mosquitoes, or scratching their ankles against the fleas that the dogs brought in with them in the winter, as men and dogs alike struggled for places of warmth and the spit sizzled at intervals against the stove's red belly.

They were still sitting around the stove as though they had not yet broken their winter habits, but the dogs were out-of-doors, wallowing in the dust, when Virginia climbed the steps to get a packet of matches.

She stood for a moment to catch her breath outside the flimsy door, and then, as the voices inside became intelligible, she froze there at the words she overheard.

'Yessiree—Red, here, seen him with his own eyes. Stepped up and hit young Perry a sock on the jaw that knocked him clean off his feet. Went down like a sack o' 'taters—didn't he, Red?'

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Red evidently nodded agreement. Virginia, who had known him before he could walk, could picture his fat, freckled face, with his cheeks full of salt-crackers, his china-blue eyes wide with importance.

'Musta been off his balance f'r Tremont to 've knocked him down. Drunk 'r sober, Ward ain't no weaklin'.'

'Fightin' over that blonde gal, they was. Ward's been sweet on her, they say. Red couldn't hear what they was sayin', but it was somepin' to do with *her*.'

'Tell 'em, Red.'

'Wal—I was comin' along the road there, in front o' the house—you can't see so good for them big trees. But Ward was standin' up on the edge of the po'ch like and it looked to me like he was fixin' to slap the girl 'r kiss her, 'r somepin'. He had her by the shoulders shakin' her, looked like. Then old man Tremont come out a-rarrin' and stompin' and just smacked Perry clean off that top step. He sent that butler o' his'n out to pick him up and took the gal in the house. I sorter hung around, and when Ward rode out he was mumblin' an' holdin' his head an' looked like he was goner vomit.'

'Wal, I'll be——'

At that moment Virginia made a commotion on the porch, tramping to make it sound as though she were just coming up the steps. She threw open the door and said, 'Howdy, Spots. Howdy, Red. Looks like you feller's 'd be out ploughin' instead of wastin' this day sittin' around in here. Give me a box of matches, Spots.'

There was a thick silence while she took the matches and paid for them. It lasted until she was down the steps and walking away.

'Reckon she heered?' asked Red.

'Naw, she'd just come up,' they said, but they were uneasy. and a few minutes later they broke up, whistled to their hounds and slouched off.

Virginia found a crumpled packet of cigarettes in the sweater pocket and lit one dejectedly. She was puzzled as to just what

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had taken place, embarrassed that Ward had made such a spectacle of himself that he had moved Tremont to such measures. And, with a woman's inconsistency, she was angry at Tremont for having knocked him down. It was bad enough to have knocked him down, she reflected unhappily, but to have made him fall all the way down the steps—and over that——! She shut her lips over the word and stalked ahead. She did not know where she'd go now—she'd lost all desire to go to Riverridge and face Johnny. In her present frame of mind she'd probably quarrel with him, and that, since both were already unhappy, was unthinkable. For a moment such a nostalgia for Luther, for the Jennifer of the old gay days, passed over her that her throat ached and her eyes filled with hot, sudden tears.

When she got to the new road which led to Lucile's, she turned off and followed it into the woods. The air was sweet with dampness and the spicy fragrance of azaleas; bird-foot violets, their pansy-like faces turned upward, matted the edge of the road with two shades of lavender and purple. Virginia stooped and pulled a cluster of bluets. The roots came up with them, fragile and infinitesimal. Holding the tiny flowers against her palm, she looked at them closely as she had every spring that she could remember, marvelling at their cloisonné-like petals of pure pale blue. Then, as she had often done before, too, she regretted having torn them from their mossy tuft. Flowers always died near her, as if sapped by her vitality, and these would be wilted in less than an hour. She laid them gently in her sweater pocket, thinking to give them to Lutie when she reached the house.

Virginia hadn't seen the Parks' house since its completion and she was delighted with its appearance now. The wide veranda and freshly curtained windows, the clapboard sides and bright red chimneys, were all so brightly new and so removed from her own dark reminiscences that she felt her mood lighten at the sight of them.

Downstairs, through the open window, she heard the painfully intermittent sound of Lutie's scales, and looking in from the

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porch she saw Jennifer's pet seated at the piano with a look of grim determination on her face, her fingers curled disdainfully back from the keys, her shoulders humped and her eyes glued on the printed page of the music primer. Virginia grinned and at the same time felt a wave of sympathy for the child, who like herself would rather be out-of-doors with no company than within with the best entertainment in the world. She rang the bell and the do-re-mi-ing stopped. Lutie came and opened the door.

'Hello,' she said uncheerfully. 'You want to see mother? She's upstairs.'

'Shall I go up?' asked Virginia. 'No, Prince, you can't come in! No dogs allowed in this nice new house. Hey, Lucile—may I come on up?'

From above there was a rustle and a scurry as if someone in draperies had moved swiftly across the hall. Then Lucile's voice, choked and so full of some deep emotion that Virginia hesitated with one foot on the lower stair step, cried, 'Aunt Virgie! Oh, I'm so glad you've come! Do—come up—I need you.' The voice broke, and Virginia, with a look that sent Lutie reluctantly back to the piano, began to climb the stairs.

Lucile was in a *négligé*; her hair was pushed back from her face, which was blotched and haggard. She'd evidently been crying, and even as she waited for Virginia she paced back and forth uncontrollably. When Virginia, puffing slightly, reached the upstairs hall, Lucile threw herself upon her and began to cry, little strangled, gasping sobs which seemed to shake her to the bone. The older woman's spontaneous pity was marred by a faint regret that she had turned off at Lucile's place after all. All of her contacts with humans seemed unfortunate today, she thought ruefully, and she was farther from Jennifer than ever here, for Lucile had none of her mother's courage and sparkle.

'What in the world—my dear child!' she cried, propelling Lucile to a chair. The hall was a square, friendly place which Lucile had transformed with bright chintzes and ferns and books to an informal upstairs sitting-room. Lucile, from the depths of a

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fat chair covered with pink roses, wept with an obvious attempt at self-control and waved a letter in Virginia's face. Virginia, feeling for the glasses she wore pinned on her left shoulder, shook out the folded letter and moved to the window to read it. She had thought perhaps that Dorothy had got into some mischievous escapade at school, or that some relative, just learning of Jennifer's death, had become upsettingly maudlin. What she now read was almost as complete a shock to her as it had been to Lucile, but it affected her very differently.

The paper was not good, but not extremely cheap, simply undistinguished, like the hand in which the letter was written. The note was short and Virginia read it twice:

Dear Mrs. Parks:

I think you ought to know that everybody in town and out around where you live is talking about your father and that blonde girl he's living with. She ought to be run out of town. And as for a man your father's age, carrying on that way when your mother (poor thing) is not six months in her grave, well I think lynching's too good for him. It's your duty to run this girl off and if you don't you are just as bad as the pair of them.

The letter was, of course, unsigned. As Virginia finished it a wave of utter weariness and nausea came over her. She turned and looked at Lucile, who sat crouched in the chair with a handkerchief pressed to her lips, her eyes swollen and bewildered.

'A thoroughly nasty, vile note, written by an utterly common person,' said Virginia, throwing it on the table by the window. 'So common in fact that if it were me she'd written to I'd simply pay no attention to it.'

'But Father!' cried Lucile. 'They might do him some harm!'

'Bosh! Your father's too well known here. This is just some cheap woman tryin' to get attention!' But Virginia wished the scene in the store were not burning in her mind like a fresh brandmark.

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'It's just that type of person who makes up mobs and does brutal things like tarring and feathering people! You know that! I've got to show it to him. I've got to make him see that he must get an older woman there or send Isabel away. I've told him over and over again he ought to——' Lucile rose and began her endless pacing. 'I've gone to no end of trouble to get women—three of them now—and take them out there; but I can't suit him and Father is so proud and so stubborn—he thinks that nobody can think any ill of him because he knows he's upright himself! Oh, Aunt Virgie, how am I going to face him with anything as sordid as this? I just can't bear to think of going over there!'

'You want me to do it?' asked Virginia. (And she thought, *'You old fool, why do you always try to run other people?'*)

'No. I can't ask you to. But—if you'd go with me—oh, *why* did this happen! It just seems too dreadful——!'

'Listen, Lucile. The way I feel about a thing like this is that the quicker it's met—if you're determined to do something about it—the better. Go wash your face and put on something pretty and comfortable. Tell Jim to hitch up the horse for you and we'll drive over there now. I'll call Jim and you dress. We'll take this right to John and get it straightened out.'

She went to the head of the stairs and called to Lutie, who was making a pretence of practising again.

'Tell Jim-boy to hitch up your mother's buggy and bring it around to the front,' she said. 'We've got to go on a little business trip.' She gave Lutie a mock look of importance which Lutie met with a grin. The look told Lutie not to upset her mother by asking to go with them, and Lutie's grin and the flop of her short pigtails answered that she didn't want to go, anyway.

A few minutes later, Lucile and Mrs. Perry drove off in the buggy, the letter folded carefully in Lucile's purse next to a dry handkerchief. Her cheeks were burning and her eyes stung in the fresh wind.

'I'm surprised Ran allows you to drive a horse,' said Virginia. 'Being in the automobile business——'

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Lucile smiled faintly. 'He thinks I could never learn to drive an automobile. He takes it to town every day and we drive it on Sundays; but it's nice to have the horse to come fetch us when the car breaks down or the tyres pop,' she added with a flicker of mischief.

If only the trip were longer, thought Virginia. Lucile's control might be fully restored before they got there. For in a world so windy-sweet and fragrant no one could keep a dark thought very long, not even she, herself, who had started out so unhappily.

But they had hardly settled to the buggy's easy movement when they came to the wide gate of Riverridge and Lucile turned the horse in between the low stone walls, where the buckberries' tiny white flowers reached up to meet the climbing roses Jennifer had planted there.

Virginia, looking furtively at Lucile, saw that her unhappiness had deepened again. She felt nervous, herself, about the interview before them and half-hoped that Tremont would not be at home. She dreaded Ward's name being brought up and what she might discover about him. If Lucile had time to cool off, she thought, she might get over her determination to warn her father against this imagined danger.

But once they had entered the gracious front hall there appeared to be no escape. Fount, refilling the whiskey decanters on the hall console, said that Mr. John was in his room right now dressing after a most 'tejus' ride over the farm. If the ladies would wait in the parlour he'd tell him and would they like some tea?

'Not now, Fount, thank you,' said Lucile shortly. 'Tell my father that Mrs. Perry and I wish to see him—alone.'

She swept into the front parlour, and Virginia, wondering just how she had got mixed up in this, followed her, pulling off the worn gloves and making an attempt to straighten the brim of the disreputable army hat.

They sat silently while they waited, Virginia looking out of the windows at the emerald green of the new grass, conscious of the

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emptiness of the room at the end of the hall where she had always been with Jennifer in the past. Lucile sat upright, her mouth shut hard to stop its trembling, her gloved hands clasped tight in her lap.

They heard Tremont's quick step in the hall and both felt a prickly of nervousness. Lucile looked beseechingly at Virginia, as if begging the older woman to stand by her, and an instant later Tremont was in the room, they had risen, and Lucile felt her father's arms about her, his light kiss on her flushed cheek.

'How nice this is!' cried Tremont. 'Only it looks a little formal. Since when have you come hatted and gloved and seated in the parlour like the Queen of Hearts to call on your old father, my dear? I'm flattered that you've come, really I am. But you both looked so stern when I came in, as though I were a bad boy being called up for reprimanding.'

At their expressions he paused, his hand on the back of the chair he had intended sitting in, and said slowly: 'What is this? Whose canaries are missing? You've both swallowed a large one, I see. What's the trouble, my dear?' he asked with a change of tone as Lucile's eyes filled with tears and her chin quivered convulsively.

She fumbled in her purse and handed him the hateful note. He looked at her a long moment before he strode to the window and unfolded it.

Virginia watched him read it, watched the incredulity turn to disgust and anger, saw the brown recede from his face and the white line which indicated his rare fury spring about his lips. He turned back to them with the letter in his hand and stared at Lucile's bowed head under its wide-brimmed hat. His eyes were black in his pale face and the paper trembled slightly in his hand. 'Do you believe this, Lucile?' he asked quietly.

She looked up, her eyes swimming, 'Papa! Of course not! It's not what we who know you think about it—it's what people outside will say. Oh, I knew this would happen! This is what I was trying to tell you—when I brought those women here. I

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knew you should have someone—I knew people would talk!’ Lucile began to cry in earnest now, as though the spoken words had broken through the thin dam of her control. ‘Oh, everybody in town is talking about you!’

‘Everybody? My dear,’ Tremont pulled his chair over close to her and sat down. He took her free hand in his and said: ‘All my life I have cared nothing whatsoever for what Everybody said. What my friends think of me, only, is important; and if they can know me and think ill of me, they automatically cease to be my friends.’ He laughed. ‘I guess that’s conceit. I reckon I’m so sure that I’m all right, I feel that if anybody thinks I’m not they lack discrimination. Well—maybe it is—I’m just made that way. For the same reason, I never explain what I do. I feel that people who count will figure that I have a good reason for doing a thing; and I feel if they are disloyal to me, than they lose as much in losing my friendship as I have lost with their loyalty.’

He patted her hand and rose, thrusting both hands behind him, and began to pace the floor as she had seen him do thousands of times when he argued or listened to an argument.

‘So you see—you needn’t have worried about me. I’m too old to heed gossip now. Forget it, my dear—it’ll blow over in no time, when we ignore it. Let’s have a drink—what say? Or would you prefer tea, my dear?’

He turned towards the hall to summon Fount, but Virginia stopped him by the seriousness of her tone when she said: ‘John—it’s all right for you to be independent, but have you considered what you’re doing to Isabel’s reputation by not having a chaperone here? She hasn’t your wide circle of friends, your years of integrity behind her—she hasn’t anything, as a matter of fact, except what you let her have.’

‘You mean—but of course! It’s a slur on her, too,’ he said slowly and his eyes darkened again, narrowing against the fury of his resentment. ‘But—they can’t think——’ He ran his hand through his hair while an expression of deep concern crossed his face. Suddenly, obviously having come to a decision, he

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stepped to the hall and shouted up the stairs, 'Isabel! Isabel!'

They heard a door open and stood there in the library looking at each other apprehensively.

'She'll blame me for all this!' whispered Lucile. 'I promised her she should stay here as long as she liked, and of course, after this she'll have to leave. And she'll always feel that I—that it was me that brought it up——'

'Hush,' said Virginia, for Isabel's voice could be heard on the stairs and a second later she came into the room, Tremont's hand light against her elbow.

Isabel looked from one to the other of the older women questioningly and her heart sank. What had she ever said or done to or with Ward Perry to bring his mother here, she thought frantically. Hoping that they would not sense her anxiety, she smiled as coolly as she could and said, 'I thought I heard voices, but when I sent Jinny down she said, Fount said it was somebody to see Mr. Tremont alone.' She stopped and looked at Tremont as if reminding him that it was his house and up to him to carry on the amenities.

Virginia thought, '*I can't make out to save me whether she has the wiles of a serpent or the guile of a dove!*'

'Sit down, girls, sit down,' said Tremont, pulling chairs forward. 'Isabel, Lucile and Mrs. Perry have come here with some rather unpleasant news.' He paused and all three looked at the girl's face intently. She had paled, if anyone as habitually fair as Isabel could be said to grow paler, and her eyes, dark in the shadowy room, fastened on his face.

'It seems that gossip has it that I am a lecherous old man who has all but—well, maybe you wouldn't know the word—but has kept you here for my own pleasure and made—er—improper advances to you.'

Isabel thought instantly of Ward's drunken accusations. She turned to stare at Mrs. Perry, who went deep scarlet and said, 'Not me, my child! Don't look at me that way! This is as much a shock to me as to the rest of you.'

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'I want you to tell my daughter and my old friend that none of this is true,' said Tremont, but before Isabel, who was completely dumfounded, could answer, Lucile sprang up and said hotly: 'Papa! You know perfectly well that she need not do that. You're taking entirely the wrong attitude about it and you—you're insulting me, yes, you are! I only came here because I thought you might be in real danger from some of these hoodlums, I didn't come to question your behaviour. You know that!'

'I apologize,' said Tremont, a little wearily. 'I only wanted you to be able to tell anybody who might ask you that you had been told point-blank by Isabel that I had never—annoyed her.'

'I don't think that they felt she was "annoyed,"' said Virginia dryly. 'I gather that they mean to insinuate that a good time is being had by all.'

'You mean they think such things of Isabel, too? An utterly innocent, young girl who is in this position through no initiative of her own! Why the——' He stopped and bit his lip, pacing in short, quick turns about the room.

Isabel looked from Virginia to Lucile and back again. The expression on her face was unfathomable to the two women. It was almost, thought Virginia, like one of the beagles' when it doesn't know whether it's going to be petted or thrown out-of-doors.

Tremont came and stood near them, leaning on the polished table between the two long, sun-slashed windows. He pulled at his lower lip thoughtfully with his left hand. The other pressed hard on the table, as though he were trying to keep down something violent that he might say or think. Lucile, watching him, thought irrelevantly how fine he looked, how immaculate in his white linen, with his lean brown hands exquisitely kept, his thin, clean-shaven face sober now, in deep thought. In the table's polished surface the white blur of his suit was reflected, and Lucile, astonished at the mind's concern with details at a time like this, thought, '*She does keep the house looking beautifully—you'll have to grant her that!*'

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'Yes,' said Tremont. The word was spoken softly, almost as though it were said for his ears alone, and yet it sounded like an explosion in the long silence of the room. 'I realize now what's been going on. How blind I've been! Something Jackson said at the Club last week—and Peters—I didn't dream what they were getting at. And you tried to tell me, Lucy. I've no one to thank for this damnable situation but myself. For myself I have no concern—I've already told you what I feel about gossip as it concerns me; but for Isabel—it's very different.'

He moved to the windows which looked out over the front lawn and stood with his back to them for some moments. At last he turned and said lightly, 'So they want something to talk about, do they?' He laughed, a hard, angry laugh, but at the same time his eyes, on Isabel, were humourless, even pitying. He said evenly: 'Isabel, I have something to ask you and I want you to answer it without fear or consideration for anyone's feelings or opinions. I want you to know that you may accept my proposition in your own terms. It seems to me that things go very smoothly here, that you and I and Jonah get along very well without any Mrs. Grundy to help us. But——' he shrugged. 'What I mean to say, my dear, is, will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?'

He bowed as he said it, and Isabel had a fleeting impression of Evan looking out of his grandfather's mocking eyes. That the mockery was not for her she felt certain; it was for the Grundys. It was like a challenge and it decided her reply.

In the tingling silence, broken only by a single gasp from Lucile, Isabel's faint reply was plainly audible. No one seeing her then could have felt that this was anything but a tremendous shock to her as well as to the others. Her face was as pale as a freesia and her eyes had turned blue-black between the widened lids.

She rose, her hands clasped in front of her, and whispered, 'Yes!' Then, turning her head slowly, she stared at Lucile, who had risen too, as if she would stop her, and some emotion, excitement, triumph, spite—Lucile could not tell which—dawned in her face. She repeated, in a stronger voice, 'Yes. Yes, I will

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marry you, Mr. Tremont,' and turning, went swiftly from the room.

They stood like wax figures, listening to her running steps, muted on the hall carpet, sharp on the polished hall floor, and muted again as she ran up the carpeted stair. It was not until they heard her door close softly that any one of them moved, and then Lucile cried agonizingly: '*Papa!* You can't do this! It's preposterous—why, it's a *scandal!* What are you thinking of—Mamma not gone six months—and you—old enough to be the girl's grandfather!'

'We'll not discuss it. I feel that this is the honourable thing to do,' said Tremont coldly. 'I think I've explained my policy of *not* explaining. May I offer you ladies some refreshment?'

Lucile began to cry. She put her hands over her face and sobbed, deep, long-drawn sobs of utter abandon like a small, despairing child. Virginia sighed and looked at Tremont with annoyance, but whether it was for what he had just done or because he had upset Lucile again, he couldn't tell. She rose, pulling on her gloves, and he went to her, putting his arm around her shoulders. 'Forgive an old friend,' he said sadly, 'and perhaps an old fool. . . . It seems a good way to me—I'm an old man; I'll be gone soon, and then this young woman, who had been kindness itself to Jonah and me, will be taken care of.'

He turned to speak to Lucile, but she had swept past him and was fumbling at the door-knob. In a voice choked and heavy with misery she said, 'I'll never set foot in this house again—*never*—as long as that girl is here!'

She flung the door open and went down the steps, and Virginia, turning to Tremont who stood soberly watching her, said: 'I don't envy you, Johnny. You've really started something now. However, I love you—in spite of your being a chivalrous old fool. Anything I can do to smooth things over——' She left him with a hurried pat on his arm.

For a long time he stood staring after them. Lucile's words had frightened him, and he wondered, watching Virginia's sturdy

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back as they drove off under the trees, if it had not been Ward who had started all this gossip, after all. With a sigh he closed the door and went into his office. From a drawer of his desk he took a bottle of fine brandy and poured a stiff drink. When he had finished it, he went to the door of Jennifer's room and opened it slowly.

The room was cold with being so long shut away. There was a stiffness about it that had never been there when Jennifer was alive. The bed, made up and smooth, the bureau with its fresh scarf, the empty wheel chair near the window, all spoke of something done with forever. If he had hoped to come close to her here, he was disappointed. She was here neither to comfort nor to reproach. Nevertheless he crossed the room softly, a terrible loneliness seeping into his very bones. He stood a moment by the empty bed and then he knelt, his head resting against the rough counterpane, his arms spread out across the bed's roundness. For a long time he stayed there, motionless and silent; and at last peace came to him. He rose and looked about him, and then left the room. He knew that he would never set foot in it again until every vestige of Jennifer's belongings, every reminder of her vivid presence, had been removed.

He went into the pantry, where Fount, deep in the folds of the morning paper, slept to the accompaniment of two buzzing flies. Tremont woke him and said: 'Fount, I'm going on a trip in a few days. I want you to take everything out of Mrs. Tremont's room while I'm gone. You can get somebody to help you. Take the bed and the rest of the furniture and put it up on the third floor. Be very careful of it. Take the pictures and stack them in my study—I'll hang them there later. Take that chest, the Chinese one that she kept her perfumes in, and wrap it in something like an old quilt and cart it over to Miss Lucile's. Mrs. Tremont wanted Lutie to have it and I should have taken it before now. Everything else is to go upstairs. The bedlinen can go in with the other house linen—Jinny will see to that—and the ornaments and toilet things are to be packed in the bureau drawers. I'm going to

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New Orleans and I'll order some furniture for that room—down there.'

'Yassuh,' said Fount, bobbing. After Tremont had left, he stood staring after him. In the acute, intuitive way that Negroes and children have, he knew that Tremont had passed through some disturbing crisis. He shook his head, scratching it carefully. And as he folded a section of the *Tennessean* to swat the flies he said, 'Some doin's 'round hyere lately.'

Back again on the pike, Virginia took the reins, as Lucile's misery was so great that she was incapable of driving. She huddled beside Virginia, wiping at her streaming eyes while the horror of what she had just been through went around and around in her head.

She felt that her ill-omened visit to her father had precipitated a situation which was not only intolerable to her, but would be the subject of much wider gossip than that to which he had already been exposed. He had hurt her deeply by suggesting that she had believed the rumours about him, and his grand gesture of making an honest woman of Isabel—who, Lucile secretly believed, could not be made into anything but a sly little opportunist—was a blow she felt she could never forgive. Worst of all, she felt that her father had almost instantly regretted his action, for he had broken his rule of not explaining when he had said, 'I feel that this is the honourable thing to do.'

Not only did he show by these words that he was making a sacrifice, but that he felt that he had to justify his actions to his own daughter who had always considered herself closest to him. The fact that Isabel would be set up as mistress of River-ridge, that the town would rock with the scandal, and that Tremont had declared that he would insure the girl's future, were no more tragic to Lucile than the fact that Tremont had doubted her faith in him.

At that thought her hurt and grief became so uncontrollable that Virginia was alarmed.

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'For Heaven's sake, Lucy, don' take on so!' she cried nervously. 'The whole thing may blow over—may not amount to a hill of beans. It's almost comical when you stop to think of it,' she said, with a rueful grin. 'Us rushin' in there all worked up over one thing and then rushin' out, less than a half-hour later, worked up over somethin' different! Looks like we were a big help—gettin' Johnny out of the fryin'-pan and into the fire.' If this had been intended to amuse Lucile, it failed utterly, and Virginia, cutting a discouraged eye at her, said in a different tone: 'Anyway, by tomorrow it may look very different—maybe they'll both reconsider and everything'll be all right. Half the tears I've shed in my life were spilled over somethin' that never did happen.'

Lucile's sobs decreased. She mopped at her eyes and straightened her unbecoming black hat. Her lashes were damp and separated so that, with the flush of her tears, her shiny nose and swollen lips, she looked extremely childlike and woe-begone. Virginia felt her heart ache with pity for her, but at the same time she wished that Lucile had more of Jennifer's spunk. However, she argued with herself, it's a good deal to ask you to adapt yourself on such short notice to a stepmother nearly twenty years younger than yourself.

'Who knows,' she said, after a long silence—'it might be a good thing, if it does go through. She keeps the place beautifully, and she's probably too cold to fall in love with another man. She won't meet many that could offer her what your father can, anyway, and I gather that's what counts with her. So don't make yourself miserable picturing the worst—it will all work out. You'll see.'

'But with Mamma not dead six months—and the difference in their ages. Think of the talk! Oh, I'll never be able to look people in the face again!'

'Pooh! Don't flatter yourself that people think that much about you. They'll talk a lot, sure, and giggle and speculate. And the worse row you kick up about it, the more they'll have to talk about. The quicker you accept it and at least pretend

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that it's a suitable thing, the less they're going to have to set their catty teeth into. But, lawsee! Somebody else will do something shortly to distract 'em. They'll get used to seeing Isabel around and some day you'll wonder what you got so upset about.

'Here,' she went on, handing the reins to Lucile, 'I'll get out at my gate and walk up. Started out because I needed exercise and haven't done anything but sit.'

She wanted to sort out her mixed emotions before she saw Ward, and she was beginning to feel the strain of keeping Lucile's misery under control.

'Go home and just shut your mind to it tonight,' she said, leaning over and kissing the younger woman. (*'And a mistake this was,'* she thought wryly, *'I'll be blubberin' myself if I start kissin' her!'*) 'You can't help one iota by worryin'—and mark my words—tomorrow it'll be different.'

'It's an insult to Mamma!' said Lucile thickly, her chin quivering again. 'Everybody'll think so.'

'Nonsense, it's got nothing to do with your mother. It's just that Johnny's so damned upright he thinks he's got to make an honest woman of her, and everybody who knows him will realize that.'

(*'And Ward's to blame!'* she thought bitterly.)

'Now you go along home and rest up. You don't want Lutie to see you in this state. Have Letha fix you a cup of tea and bathe your eyes—coddle yourself a little and get Ransome to take you out. You've been shut up there since you were four months gone with that baby—no wonder you look on the dark side of things. Tomorrow things will be a lot brighter.'

But as she trudged up her own driveway she wondered. Tomorrow might be different, but would it be any better? It had been an amazing afternoon. She wondered if it would have worked out as it had if she had not had the impulse to take a walk, if she had not stopped at Spots' store, and further, having walked to Lucile's, if she had not urged Lucile to see her father

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that day. Perhaps if she had not given Lucile the impetus, Lucile might have let the whole thing drift, the gossip would never have reached Tremont's ears, and eventually the situation would have worked itself out in a normal way. Neither Tremont nor Ward would have mentioned the affair to her and she would have been spared the knowledge that her best friend's husband had had to discipline her grown son. She was depressed and worried now, and the afternoon, which was waning into a cool twilight, seemed to have lost its beauty.

Half-way up the drive she paused where a wooden bench had been built around a tree, and sat down. She dreaded going into the house in her present mood for fear that she would unburden herself to Ward. She had no idea how he stood on the question of Isabel and she felt that her control had been strained enough that day not to be put to the severer test of a scene with him. He had been going out occasionally at night and she had supposed that it was to Riverridge, but now she realized that he had not mentioned Isabel since his father's death. Perhaps he felt he had no right to, for he was, at last, fully aware of his financial status, or lack of it, and no doubt he sensed, under his adoration, the fact that a poor man would never win Isabel Page. Virginia, already dejected, became further disheartened at the thought that Ward was unhappy.

She wished she had Jennifer to talk to, and her longing for her became suddenly so acute that she was seized with a physical weakness and leaned back against the trunk of the tree and shut her eyes. If Jennifer were here, with her dry forthrightness and sense!—But if Jennifer were here, she thought, wryly, none of this would have occurred. There would be few others in her time like Jennifer—it seemed to her that all those who were left since Jennifer and Luther had died were colourless. Their faults and virtues alike were small. There were no more giants, no individuals, no one left but John with a personal code that defined convention.

'Colourless,' she mumbled. 'Shilly-shallying.'

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She shoved her hands into the pockets of the old sweater and felt the limp bundles of bluets. She drew them out and looked at them. They were wilted and dry, the petals faded, the roots curled pitifully, like the tiny claws of dead birds.

Stooping, she pulled aside a little mound of mossy earth and pushed the roots beneath it with a stubby, gloved finger. There was a chance if it rained soon that they might take root, she told herself. But she knew better. She'd done the same thing dozens of times, and they had never come up again next spring. The bluets were dead, and the dead don't come back.

She stood up, breathing a little unsteadily, and went slowly towards the dark house, a lonely old woman, stooping a little in the spring twilight.



CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN Jonah came home from the university that afternoon he sensed at once a pervading quiet in the house. He was surprised when he went into his bedroom to see his grandfather standing at one of the windows. Jonah's room faced north and from it one could see the north lawn, the fences which hid the kitchen garden and poultry yard, covered with ancient rose vines, just coming into a profusion of bloom. Farther on there was a glimpse of the north slope of the bluff, the pastures and the gleam of the river.

The draught from the opening door drew in the crisp curtains and he was conscious of the fragrance of the old-fashioned roses.

His grandfather turned and looked at him with an unfathomable, absent expression and then smiled suddenly.

'Hello, boy,' he said gently.

'Hello, sir,' said Jonah and began to take off his coat and shirt.

Tremont straddled a chair and watched Jonah affectionately as he scrubbed and towelled and wriggled into a clean shirt.

He said nothing more until Jonah was dressed again, and then he said, 'Sit down, son. I've something to say to you.'

Jonah, puzzled, sat on the edge of the bed.

'You know, it's a funny world,' said Tremont slowly. 'There are a lot of fine people in it and a lot that haven't anything to do except to mind other people's business.'

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(*'What have I done to get a lecture?'*) thought Jonah and he began to search his past actions a little anxiously.

'Always remember that the people who envy others and want to make unhappiness for them are to be pitied, Jonah. They are that way, warped and bitter and cruel, because first of all they're unhappy. If you remember this, you'll never get bitter yourself.' He got up and began to pace the carpet—his hands in his pockets.

'Wherever you are there are always a few of them and unfortunately they can make life devilish for the rest of us. It seems that some of them have got together and decided that Riverridge has become a hotbed of wickedness because two unmarried men and an attractive young girl are living together in the same house. There's been some ugly gossip and Lucile has got terribly upset about it. She came to see me this afternoon—brought a vicious letter some crank had written her—seems they talk of tarrin' and featherin' me.' He laughed, seeing Jonah's startled look. 'Poor Lucile was actually afraid they'd do it.'

'But for what?' asked Jonah—'because you haven't put Isabel out?'

'I doubt if they'd do anything to me,' said Tremont, 'but the tar they were talking about using on me was nothing to the kind of brush they were painting Isabel with.'

He walked to the window again as if from the sight of the earth and his handiwork there he could draw the courage to say what he had to say.

'Oh,' he began, pacing, 'I suppose I could have arranged something. But it makes me so all-fired mad—and I knew it would break Isabel's heart—well, the upshot of it was that I asked her to marry me.'

Jonah's feet came down on the floor with a bang.

'You what?'

'We'll be married immediately. I have to go to New Orleans in a few days and I'll take her with me until the storm blows over.'

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Because, of course, there'll be a storm. I'm sorry it had to be done this way—and so soon after your grandmother's death. But, so help me, I couldn't see any other immediate solution. After all, it was my responsibility.'

Jonah could only stammer, 'And she—she said she *would*?'

'She was more flattering than you,' said Tremont ironically. 'She accepted without hesitation.'

Jonah felt sick; he knew why the Bible laid such stress on the emotional reactions of the bowels. He shut his teeth and hoped he did not show how shocked he was, shocked at the unexpectedness of the whole conversation, shocked that his grandfather had been trapped into a *mésalliance*, shocked at the thought of a girl, especially Isabel, marrying a man more than three times her age.

Tremont looked at Jonah's green-white face for a moment and had a horrible suspicion that perhaps he had murdered a young love that was being born beneath his very eyes. He'd never seen any signs of especial regard towards Isabel on Jonah's part, but perhaps the boy had purposely hidden it because of his youth or his lameness. Perhaps he had already been snubbed by the girl and was now heart-broken to learn what Tremont had just told him.

He stooped over the bed where Jonah had leaned back against the pillows and was looking at the ceiling with a fixed stare. His own face was almost as pale as the boy's as he asked, in a voice gone suddenly husky, 'Jonah! Jonah, boy—you—you don't love her yourself, do you?'

Jonah clenched his jaws and fought down the nausea.

'Heavens, no, sir!' he managed with a short laugh. 'She *seems*—so much older than me. I think it's—fine—for both of you.'

'But you look pale,' said Tremont, his voice suddenly strong again with relief. 'I thought for a minute I'd wounded you.'

As Jonah shook his head helplessly, Tremont began his pacing again. 'I know it's sudden—perhaps a distasteful shock to you. But with this trip to New Orleans imminent, it seemed better for

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everybody to do it this way. I'm going down to supper now. Coming?' he added, pausing with his hand on the door frame.

'In a minute,' answered Jonah. 'The heat in town—seems to have whipped me down a bit. I'll be along,' he added and prayed that his grandfather would go, and go at once, before he became actively ill.

He wasn't sick, but he lay there a long time, churned up in mind and body. He lay thinking back over the last year until the sun slipped down and the blue of summer twilight filled the garden and hid the hills. Then, hearing Fount ringing the gong for the evening meal, he rose, and stood trembling in the centre of the room for a moment with his face in his cold hands. He walked at last to the window and leaned out to catch the sweet breath of the night. The wistfulness of the spring evening went through him like a knife, the fragrance of the roses seemed to bring Jennifer right into the room, and the hot tears he could not longer control sprang to his lids.

He went to the pitcher, dabbling the clean handkerchief he had taken when he dressed, and wiped his eyes, his face, his throat which ached unbearably. For only a moment he paused and looked back into the dim room as if speaking to someone, then he straightened his shoulders and limped quickly across the hall, and to the stairs, whistling.

Tremont and Isabel were already seated at the table. She was dressed in a soft white frock that bared her shoulders and the candlelight on her fair hair burnished the halo that emphasized the purity of her beauty. Fount, passing the smoking biscuit, seemed slightly more obsequious than usual as he lifted the napkin and offered the silver tray to her. And in that flashing second in which Jonah appraised the scene, he realized that this was a dress rehearsal for the future, and that Fount was aware of it too.

Both Isabel and Tremont looked up as Jonah entered and he felt for the millionth time the surprise of seeing how dark blue were her eyes. He shifted his gaze to his grandfather's brown

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and somewhat anxious ones, and then Jonah smiled. It was a smile of such tenderness and assurance that Tremont felt his heart leap at it, and he dropped his own gaze, blinded by the selfless beauty of the boy's.

Neither Isabel nor Jonah said much during the meal. But Tremont seemed unusually gay and talkative. He described the trip to New Orleans as he had seen it the first time, his great interest in the beautiful homes of Natchez, and the tall tales he heard about Big and Little Harp, Annie Christmas, the pirates of Cave-In-Rock and the perils of the mail and shipping business of earlier days. He kept them both absorbed and entertained, and even Fount caught himself several times standing with open mouth at the climax of some picaresque episode.

It was late when they rose from the table, and Jonah felt the relaxation and good-humour which Tremont had striven to inject into what might have been an extremely awkward occasion.

As Tremont and Isabel left the dining-room, she slipped her arm through his and walked out with him. Jonah, standing by his chair, watched them with a return of something of the feeling that had assailed him in his room. It seemed to him that she swept her long lashes up at his grandfather with conscious possessiveness. The dress she had worn, evidently in deference to the occasion, made her look taller and much more mature. They made a handsome couple in spite of the difference in their ages. It occurred to Jonah that he had not congratulated either of them and it would be awkward to do so now.

Fount, flicking invisible crumbs from the table with a napkin, rolled a tentatively humorous eye at Jonah. As Jonah continued to stare after the two who were crossing the hall, Fount straightened up and stood beside him, watching them with him.

'Um—hum!' he said with a chuckle. 'Miss Isabel done growed up ter be a raley gorgeous-lookin' lady!'

'She has,' said Jonah shortly and went out. He did not cross the hall, but went out of the front door and down the broad steps. Out under the trees he was with Jennifer again; he could

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roll back the years. In the thick grass he stretched out, face down, and let memory wash over him like shallow waves. He felt no deep grief or bitterness, only a lightness and disembodiment. There was a calm fatality within him, as if at long last had come the thing he had unwittingly dreaded that day, a year ago, when Isabel Page had looked up at him and laughed at the foot of the steps at Riverridge.

He had been lying there for a long time with his cheek against the cool grass, listening to the crickets in the garden and the frogs' guttural music from the river. He was so completely a part of the sounds and the scents of the night that he almost missed the light click of the porch screen. Raising his head he blinked through the dark and saw Isabel coming down the steps, the light from the hall making a nimbus of her hair. She came swiftly, as though eager to get out of the house's closeness, and to Jonah's surprise, went straight across the lawn to Jennifer's enclosed garden.

The trees and the shrubbery hid her, but there was the sound of the little white picket gate being opened. He got stiffly to his feet and followed her, keeping in the shadows. He saw her moving slowly back and forth among the little grassy paths, her head bent. She had brought a white silk shawl over her arm, he saw as his eyes grew more accustomed to the light, and suddenly she shook it out with a rich, swirling movement and threw it across her shoulders. In the dark garden, by the faint light of the narrow moon, she was ineffably beautiful. He forgot that she was the interloper, the girl who had blown hot and cold in him, the beauty who had made him feel his own physical inadequacy. She might have been some mothlike creature from the moon, sent on this soft night to fill his hungry soul with a satiety of loveliness.

Suddenly she stopped and over the sound of the insects he heard her give a small gasp. She drew the shawl about her and moved towards the gate, but looked back over her shoulder. In

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a pantomime of Life and Death, the black shadows of the trees seemed to bend over and pursue the white figure. For a moment Jonah knew that their two hearts beat in violent unison. When the far gate clicked and Ransome Parks' voice said uncertainly, 'Isabel? Is that you?' and when she answered 'Yes,' he added heartily, 'What in the world are you doing out here by yourself? You look like a ghost—all in white. You had me scared for a minute.'

'You frightened me, too,' said Isabel as he came and stood by her. 'But I don't know why. I'm seldom afraid. Evan says that it's because I haven't any imagination.'

Evan! Jonah hadn't thought of him before. The picture of Tremont and Isabel had been too bewildering to allow him to think beyond it yet. But now the thought of Evan came with such a shock that he felt his gasp must be audible in the night. It made Isabel's acceptance of Tremont more monstrous than ever. And was this an assignation? No, Isabel had been really startled when Ran appeared, he would have sworn it.

Ransome had taken her arm and was walking with her. The paths were narrow and they walked so close that Jonah could hear the stuff of their garments brush together occasionally.

'So Evan says you have no imagination, eh?' Ransome was saying in the bluff, bland way he had, 'Well, girly, I could have told you that. If you had had you'd never have dared to do what I understand you did today.'

Isabel said nothing, and Ran, his voice losing some of its pleasantry, said: 'Hadn't you any idea of the storm you'd bring down on yourself? Of the gossip? Why, Lucile's about out of her mind! Bawling like Niagara—says she'll never dare look anybody in the face again.'

'I can't see why it should bother *her*!' said Isabel harshly. 'After all—if she hadn't come over here crying and being so—so *virtuous*, it would never have happened.'

'But, honey, surely you won't go on with it—surely you're not going to throw yourself away on an old man like Tremont?'

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He stopped and stood facing her, and Jonah could see that his face was red with the urgency of his task. He thought how earthy and lusty Ransome was, always loud and hearty, always full of good food, good jokes, and gay music, and he remembered that his grandmother had liked him, and curbed his own distaste.

'Look. It isn't that Lucile minds you marryin' into the family—or anything like that. But it's the fact that if her father marries you—an old and respected man, and a young girl like you—why, he's old enough to be your grandfather, no jokin'!—well, it just makes a scandal—that's all.'

'I can't see why,' said Isabel coldly. 'Is there any reason to suppose that our marriage will be any less decent, any less legal, than anybody else's?'

Jonah felt his eyebrows go up in astonishment, and while he could not help grinning in the dark, he didn't envy Ransome the task of convincing Isabel that she should call this marriage off. Fount was right, he thought wryly, Miss Isabel had growed up.

'Why—no, certainly not,' said Ransome. 'It isn't that, Isabel, it's that it's such an unsuitable thing. Now if it had been Evan, or even Jonah—say in a year or two, it would have been all right, perfectly all right.'

'Only it happens that Jonah and Evan didn't ask me, and Mr. Tremont did.'

'But you didn't give 'em a chance——'

'Lucile didn't give them a chance,' retorted Isabel. 'Something had to be done at once, she said. Well, it's being done, so let her stop snivelling about it.'

It might have been Jennifer speaking. For a wild moment Jonah let his mind run on the idea of some strange transmigration by which Jennifer had come to inhabit Isabel's body and take a new lease on the life she had loved so well. But the scene in the garden diverted him. He heard Ran say, 'But, Isabel—surely you haven't thought—you can't mean you're willing——'

'Oh, but I am,' she answered. 'I'm willing to do anything to be taken care of. You can't know what it means not to be

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wanted, to be in the way all the time, never to have a real home, but to move from one dirty hotel to another listening to old women gossip and tell gruesome tales, always being treated like a child—because *she* wanted to be a young thing. *I hated it!*' she said with sudden passion, 'and I'd be a fool not to take anything that would get me away from it. What could I do if they sent me away? I'm not trained even to be a governess or a secretary. What could I do but marry somebody, and where would I find a man like him?' She gave a short laugh and said, drawing the shawl about her, 'Tell Lucile that I am grateful to her from the bottom of my heart!'

Ran's voice came husky and slow. 'Why, you little hussy!' It deepened as he suddenly took her in his arms, 'You beautiful, beautiful hussy!' He kissed her, a long, hard, thorough kiss before she broke away.

'Don't you ever lay hands on me again, Ransome Parks!' she said, and her voice was cold with fury. 'I'm going to marry a man old enough to be my grandfather, it's true. But he's a good man, and if there's any scandal it won't be because I met my *step-son-in-law* in the woods and made a fool of myself with him! Do you think I'd give them grounds to talk about me!'

'Your——?' Suddenly Ran broke out into a shout of laughter. 'Your *step-son-in-law*! That's a good one. Ha-ha-ha-ha!'

'Hush!' said Isabel, putting a hand on his arm. 'Be quiet. And go home, for Heaven's sake! Tell Lucile that we are going to be married tomorrow afternoon at the parish house and that if she wants to come she'll be welcome. We're going at once to New Orleans, and if there is anything of her mother's that she wants, I wish she'd come and get it while we're gone. Tell her I'm sorry that she feels as she does, but after all she *did* help to bring it about.'

'You're a cold one,' said Ransome, as though he had been thinking of her earlier remarks rather than what she was saying. 'You've always been so quiet—acting like an innocent little girl. I didn't know you had all these ideas under those taffy braids.'

JENNIFER'S HOUSE

'I didn't, exactly. I was perfectly happy the way I was. But I think I'm always going to be one of those people who—well, when things come along, is ready to take what is offered.'

'Yeah, you know what way to jump, all right. But I just can't—it's just that he's *old*, honey! Why, he'll be all broken down and you'll be tied down with a decrepit old man just when you ought to be at your best.'

'He is an old man,' agreed Isabel. 'He won't live forever. And then I'll be still young—and fixed for life.'

Ransome stared at her. 'By God! You oughter been a man. You're too hard to be a woman. I'd like to have a pardner like you. We'd make millions. And you're so God-damned *beautiful*!'

He made a move towards her, but the grandfather's clock in the house struck ten plangent notes. She put out her hand in a gesture of repulsion and said sharply, 'Go home! We'll see you when we get back—unless Lucile means to cut us permanently.'

She was gone then, running like a silvery angel across the thick grass, while Ransome stood in the garden and watched her, muttering, 'A cool one—the little hussy!' As she reached the steps he called, with laughter in his voice, 'Good night—*Mamma!*' And Jonah, feeling like the watcher of some unreal play, leaned against a tree and thought, '*If I wrote that, nobody would believe me. They wouldn't believe any of this. And yet it's all true.*'



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MRS. PERRY and Ward were at breakfast the next morning when the telephone rang. Virginia made a grimace. She had never become accustomed to the peremptoriness of the bell and felt that any news which had to be conveyed so urgently must be bad news. Pink refused to answer the thing on any provocation. Ward, wiping his mouth deliberately with his napkin, went into the hall. His mother sat listening, crumbling bread with a sense of depression. She heard Ward's voice, suave, deferential.

'Why, good morning, Lucile! You're up mighty early.'

Virginia groaned softly.

'My mother? Yes, she's right here. Anything I can do for you?'

There was a short silence and then Ward said, 'I'll call her.'

'Must be something wrong with the infant,' he said as Virginia rose. 'She wouldn't tell me, but she sounds upset.'

Virginia moved slowly across the room. She ached all over physically and she wondered what Lucile's mood would be this morning.

Obviously a dramatic one, for she had scarcely lifted the receiver before Lucile's voice began. Its excited tone, made comical by the instrument's squeakiness, caught Ward's attention as he came into the hall to get his hat. He paused behind

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his mother's back and heard Lucile saying, '—couldn't move her. He talked and *talked*, but she was like stone. She told him she'd be a fool not to take him up on it—as good as admitted that she's going to marry him for his money! Oh, she's worse than I thought—she's horrible!'

'Oh, Lucile, maybe not. Maybe something will happen yet.' Virginia was uncomfortably aware of Ward's presence behind her. She wished Lucile was in the bottom of the sea.

'How can it!' squeaked Lucile. 'They're going to be married today! This very afternoon at the parsonage! You might know she wouldn't let any grass grow under her feet, now that she's got him where she wants him.' Lucile's voice died away in an undistinguishable mutter, which, Virginia felt, was probably the most profane sentence Lucile had ever uttered in her life.

'Don't say things you'll be sorry for,' advised Virginia. 'You could see that it was a surprise to her—when he asked her, I mean.'

This last remark puzzled Ward so that he walked around to face his mother and began to make signs to her to hang up. She shook her head and said, 'Try to look at it the best you can, Lucy. I'll come over this afternoon and see you. No—no, I won't go to the wedding, I reckon.'

There was another small pandemonium from the receiver as though Lucile were talking and crying at the same time—the noise was suddenly cut off as, losing her self-control entirely, she hung up. Virginia stood listening a few seconds and then, with the corners of her mouth pulled down resignedly, she too hung up and turned away.

'What's up?' asked Ward.

Virginia went back into the dining-room and sat in the deep hard-bottomed armchair which had been Luther's. She let her hands rest on the worn arm pieces for a moment and then, shaking her head as if to clear her brain, she reached for a cigarette. Ward struck a match and lighted it for her and one for himself.

ISABEL

'A secret?' he said lightly.

She drew a long breath and let the smoke out, avoiding his eyes.

'There's an old sayin' that when the Lord needs a fool he lets a man's first wife die.'

'Meaning who?' asked Ward in an odd tone.

'Johnny. There's been some talk—two single men, pretty girl, no chaperone, plenty of opportunity for—love-making——' She saw Ward wince and he turned away, picking ostentatiously at a cocklebur on his boot top. 'Somebody wrote Lucile a nasty letter about Johnny. She got all upset and I—well, I suggested that she go and ask him what he thought he ought to do about it.' She paused and he looked up at her. The bitterness of her face made him know that she was blaming herself for something.

He said, 'Sounds sensible.'

'I thought so. But I forgot what a chivalrous old fool Johnny is. He up and asked the girl to marry him.'

Ward was still. He looked at her bleakly, his lips twisted beneath the moustache. Suddenly he began to laugh—a shout that startled the beagles under the table and brought them out yelping.

'By God, I was right!' he said fiercely. 'The old boy *was* keeping her for himself!'

'What do you mean?' asked Virginia sharply.

'Nothing. Except that I saw all along what she was after. She snapped him up, of course? God—she's a good one!' He leaned forward, his head in his hands so that Virginia could not see his face, and she sighed again, watching him with pity.

'I was afraid it would hurt you,' she said at last.

He looked up. 'Hurt *me*? Oh, no, madame! I was cured of her long ago. I saw what she was after—money, money, money—nothing else! I gave her the go-by long ago.'

She could see him now sitting at the table that morning Luther had had the stroke. She wished she could not remember his saying, 'I'd like to buy her velvet and lace and pearls. She's so beautiful—so innocent.'

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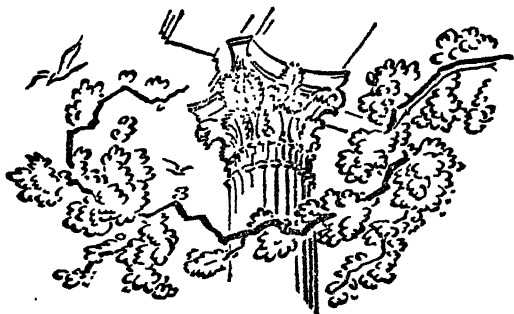
(‘She’s turned him down because she saw he was poor and hadn’t the ability to take care of her,’ thought Virginia bitterly. ‘But if she’s that kind, he’s better off without her. She and Ward must have quarrelled—when Johnny knocked him down.’)

But in justice to Isabel she said, and her voice was thick with her stifling emotion: ‘I don’t think she really planned this, Ward. He called her and asked her, right in front of us. She looked as amazed as if he’d slapped her—only sort of glad, too. Proud, maybe. I can understand *her*. What I can’t understand is Johnny. Surely he could have done something else—sent her to Lucile’s or back to her mother. Even if the woman doesn’t want her, it’s her responsibility. I just can’t see why he thought he had to do this.’

Ward rose and gave her a long ironical grin. Then he went out of the house, the hat tilted over his eyes, and she sat watching him through the casement windows, wondering how much of his feeling he had covered up with his hard laughter, his hard grinning. She ached for him and she wanted to slap him at the same time. She thought of the prospect of another afternoon with Lucile and she groaned again.

‘Pink!’ she cried, ‘bring me some hot coffee—and you get out there and hoe that vegetable garden this morning! Place’s goin’ to rack an’ ruin while you and these flea-bitten hounds sleep an’ eat!’

‘Yesm’. I sholy will,’ said Pink, who had stood, dishcloth in hand, and heard the whole conversation from the passage-way. ‘Hotter’n hell an’ black’r dan a grabeyard at midnight—dat de way she lak it,’ he sang as if to himself. ‘Come on, coffee-pot, pro-duce!’



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN Tremont and Isabel left, they gave Delia a vacation. And James Crockett, realizing something of what Jonah must have felt at his grandfather's marriage, wrote and suggested that Jonah and Evan take the money Jennifer had left them and go abroad that summer. Jonah especially welcomed the idea, for it fitted in exactly with his desire to find out more of his grandmother's background.

Dorothy, to Lucile's relief, had an invitation to visit the daughter of one of her mother's schoolmates in Georgia.

With the young people gone, and Lucile's self-imposed absence, a stillness lay over Riverridge as though the place were enchanted. Fount, Jinny, old Pompey, and occasionally Lutie, were the only souls who walked in the garden or moved through the cool dimness of the house.

Lutie pattered about her grandmother's garden, giving Pompey orders in a tone so like Jennifer's that sometimes the old Negro was moved to tears. Pompey cut the flowers and carried them to Lucile, who refused to accept them until he explained that they would stop blooming and die if they were not kept robbed of their bloom. 'Flowers is lak folks,' he said. 'Dey got ter gib out what dey got ef dey goner keep on growin' an' bein' dey bes'. And Lucile looked at him searchingly, wondering how much he knew of her feeling about Isabel.

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Fount got a field hand to help him carry Jennifer's big walnut furniture upstairs after he and Jinny had dismantled the room. The first day they had worked fearfully, glancing over their shoulders at the slightest sound, refusing to be left in the dead woman's room, one without the other. But when the walls were stripped and the furniture was moved out, the place began to take on a raw, unfamiliar air. They felt Jennifer's presence no longer, and sang and joked as they washed the woodwork and waxed the big, wide-boarded floor.

'Wonner what de boss goner put in dis room?' asked Fount, as on the second day they scrubbed and polished.

'Goner fix it up for Miss Isabel, o' course, you crazy man,' said Jinny. 'She de lady o' de house now.'

'You wanner bet?' asked Fount. 'You wanner bet ain't no woman goner eber sleep in dishyere room again? I bet you a—a—I bet you a pint o' likker 'ginst a kiss, dis ain't goner be no baidroom no *more*.'

'A pint o' likker 'ginst a *kiss*! What kinder bettin' is dat, you fool feller. You wins either way in dat kinder bet!'

They both shouted with laughter, and the argument about the room was lost in an argument about the bet. But when, a week or so later, Tremont wrote to Fount to expect a load of furniture, which must be unpacked and left in the room until Mrs. Tremont arrived to arrange it, Fount was proved right. For, though eager and bright-eyed, he and Jinny unpacked crate after crate, there was no bed or bureau among them. There was a table, a sofa, a pair of odd-looking lamps, two gorgeous Oriental rugs, and a dozen chairs.

'What dey want wid annuder parlour?' muttered Fount.

'White folks is crazy,' answered Jinny with finality.

The mimosas were fluffy with their melon-coloured blooms and their fragrance lay as thick as honey in the late afternoon air when Fount drove Tremont and Isabel up to the front of the house. He and Jinny were the only ones there to greet them, but if Tremont felt the emptiness of the big place he did not show it.

ISABEL

And Isabel, taking off her hat in her own room, stared at herself in a mirror with a swift exultance, throwing back her shoulders in a gesture of freedom. The house was hers now, all hers, and as soon as she could she meant to go over it inch by inch, savouring it and appraising it from her new vantage as mistress.

Tremont went into his office where his clothes still were and changed into comfortable khaki and his worn boots. He was eager to get out and about the place and to see how far the crops were advanced, how the stock fared, all the business of the farm. The Negroes who lived beyond the fields and who looked after the stock and the land, who never came up to the house except to consult him in his office or for some special occasion, would be waiting for him and full of news—'Taters look fine, boss.—Yassuh, we planted co'n in de low fiel' lak you say'd.—T'backer purtier den eber—nary worm yit.' He breathed in the scent of the mimosa, of the fields beyond, warm in the June sun, and the excitement which always seized him when he came back to the place made his fingers clumsy with the bootlaces. As he went through Jennifer's old room, he glanced casually at the furniture they had selected on those leisurely and fascinating tours of the French Quarter. He remembered how Isabel had looked that day under a tilted hat, holding her skirt up in one clutching hand as they left the shop and stepped across a gutter full of rubbish. She had been so consciously grown up; he had smiled then and he smiled now. But when he looked in the end of the room where Jennifer's bed had stood, he looked away quickly and went into the hall, closing the door carefully behind him.

Isabel was coming down the stairs, and he paused to look at her.

She came up to him and said, with a smile in one corner of her mouth, 'Are you going to sleep in the office still?'

He said, 'I hadn't thought. Shall I have Fount move my things up to your room, or shall we take another one?'

'I like my room,' she said. 'And I'll move your things myself. I have nothing to do until dinner time, and I see that you are already forsaking me!'

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He laughed and kissed her, thinking, as he had a number of times before, that she made their relationship a singularly easy one, that her poise for a young girl was remarkable.

She watched him go and then went into the office. It was a drab place and she wondered how he could spend so much time in it. There was a glassed-in bookcase with a number of books on the diseases of cattle and dogs, on dog training, and agriculture. On top was a dusty bust of some poet, a horseshoe, and a lumpy stone the value of which she did not even try to imagine. Tremont's desk, between two windows, was littered with seed catalogues; cigar boxes filled with odds and ends—corks, pins, pen points, bits of rock, watermelon seeds, erasers, three stale peppermints, and an old watch; his inkwell and pens, a penwiper made like a sunflower and painfully stitched by Lutie; a glass paperweight and a brass stamp box—all old and worn, and valuable to no one but Tremont himself. In the middle Fount had piled the pictures from Jennifer's room, and the week's mail. Against one wall was a washstand, although he had invariably gone into Jennifer's room to wash and shave, and a chest of drawers containing his clothes. She began to open the drawers one at a time and take out his things—his starched collars, his big linen handkerchiefs, his cuff links, the narrow black ties he always wore. Her arms were full when she staggered up the stairs and into her room, where Jinny was putting away her clothes.

She threw the things down on the bed, and Jinny, looking up from an awestruck inspection of the 'trousseau' Tremont had bought Isabel in New Orleans, glanced at the pile of masculine apparel and grinned.

'Whar yo' goner put all dat truck, Miss Isabel? You done come home now wid mo' close 'n' you kin put away in dis room. I reckon you-all ain't goner need all dese ol' thangs,' she added wheedlingly.

Isabel laughed. 'I'll see about that as soon as I get time to sort things out. I just had to get some new things down there—it was so hot—and, besides, I don't expect to get married *every* day!'

ISABEL

'No, ma'm!' agreed Jinny. 'But you goner hafter move some-p'n in hyere to put all dis stuff in.'

'I'll put all the clothes I don't expect to use every day into one of the guest-rooms—all the evening dresses, the coats, and so on. I'll take all my winter things out of here and out of my wardrobe. That'll leave plenty of room for Mr. Tremont's things, don't you think?'

'Yas'm,' answered Jinny, 'I reckon so.'

She began to carry out the armfuls of clothes which Isabel, selecting rapidly, threw out of the wardrobe and bureau. For an hour they worked steadily, and at the end of that time Tremont's suits hung as casually among her wrappers and gowns as if they had always done so, his brushes and comb lay at home on the bureau.

The evening sun slanted through the white-shuttered windows peacefully and the words that Isabel had spoken once before came to her mind; '*Now I have come home.*'

Out in the-yard, with the hound bitch at his heels, Tremont expanded. A June apple tree at the edge of the woods had dropped its small delicious fruit, and he stooped and thrust several in his pocket, keeping one to eat.

He leaned on the fence and stared over the fields, noting what had been done in his absence and calling it good. On the way back he stopped at the stables and inspected the new colt, whose velvety nose against his fingers stirred him almost to tears. Giant hydrangeas drooped their heads along the side driveway, and in Jennifer's garden the Shasta daisies, zinnias, and larkspur bloomed in a blaze of colour.

He thought longingly for a moment of Lutie and Lucile, wondered where Dorothy was, but a few moments later forgot them as Isabel came on to the porch and said that there was a pile of mail for him in the library.

In a week Tremont had settled back into his life at Riverridge, as though he had never been away. Lutie came over and trotted

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about the place with him, and once he had gone over to Lucile's on the excuse that he must see his new grandson. Little Ran was now eight months old, a lusty, red-headed baby who already showed signs of rowdiness. He took to Tremont whole-heartedly, and Lucile, who had given her father a cool cheek to kiss, but had not asked after Isabel, watched them together with a deeper anger burning in her heart that Isabel had come between her and her father. She felt that Isabel's presence deprived the children of being, as they would have been if Jennifer had lived, as much at home at Riverridge as they were in their own house; for while she had been unable to forbid Lutie the care of her mother's garden, since Jennifer had expressly wished it, she was more determined than ever that Dorothy should have nothing more to do with Isabel.

'It's indecent!' she thought miserably, and her father, looking up to laugh at some cuteness of Ran's, caught the hurt in her eyes and his own heart sank with unhappiness. A little later he left and walked back through the woods, wondering how he could bring about a reconciliation.

Meantime Isabel had plunged into her housekeeping with the zest which always follows a respite from duty. Added, too, was a new sense of possession. She had written Jinny minute instructions about taking down and brushing the winter draperies, having the summer ones laundered and put up again. She went from room to room that first few days, approving, rearranging, savouring. When she had seen that everything was in its accustomed place and that no dust or fingerprints marred the glossy beauty of the furniture, she set about to arrange the room which had been Jennifer's. The Oriental rugs were put side by side on the floor, the chairs and sofa tried out in various places, the lamps set on the tables, and new draperies of gold damask unfolded for Jinny's awed inspection.

'What's dis room goner be?' asked Jinny. 'Seem's sorter empty lak fer a parlour.'

'It's to be a small ballroom, really,' said Isabel, folding the

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heavy gold cloth and putting it back into the box. 'It has to have something in it all the time, but later, perhaps this winter, when we begin to entertain, we can take up these rugs and dance here. Mr. Tremont has agreed to cut a big arch from this room into the hall, and when we throw it all open it will make a big T-shaped ballroom. Don't you think that will be lovely?'

'Yas'm,' said Jinny dubiously, and Isabel knew that she was wondering who would come to the dances and thinking that Lucile and Dorothy being absent might keep such a large faction of Jennifer's old friends away from Riverridge, and that big parties such as the house had known in old days would be impossible.

'We can't entertain now,' said Isabel. 'People wouldn't like it, so soon after Mrs. Tremont's death.' (She still thought of Jennifer as Mrs. Tremont and her own as an anomalous title, as though, which was in a sense true, she had not married Tremont, but Riverridge, and what it stood for.) 'But later we'll have to. Don't worry,' she added, seeing the doubt still on Jinny's mobile face, 'people will be coming here again. They'll start coming to call soon now—you watch. They'll come out of curiosity—because I'm so much younger than Mr. Tremont,' she said; but what she thought was, *'They'll come to see if I'm putting on airs, if I'm awkward, if I'm pregnant yet. They'll come to show him they still mean to stand by him even if he was "roped in by a hussy."* *They'll come to see how I keep house and what changes I've made. Well, they'll see!'*

She folded the last curtain and looked around the big room with satisfaction. It looked larger now, with Jennifer's huge bed and bureau, the Chinese cabinet, the wheel chair, the cedar chest and washstand, and smaller objects removed from it. Even the windows, with the white ruffled curtains gone, seemed taller and more formal. The sun fell through the slatted shutters on to the rugs which glowed with a warm winey red, and for a moment Isabel remembered sitting there the second day she was in the house with the sun falling just so, reading to Jennifer while Lutie hemmed on her dish-towel, and she thought, as she had hundreds

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of times, with exultation, of how rapidly her ambitions had been realized.

She had seen Lutie only once, when Tremont had brought her in to eat a bowl of strawberries with him in his office. They had been discussing the flower garden, and their voices, his low and flexible and hers high with excitement, had mingled and floated through the house annoyingly. Isabel had never felt comfortable around Lutie. There was something in the direct look from those clear brown eyes that made her feel as if here were the one person in the household who knew that under her sweet docility she was hard—hard and very far-sighted.

As Isabel had predicted, the neighbours came to call. They had not been home two weeks before the carriages began to cross the stop-gap at four or thereabouts each afternoon, and Fount, roused from his siesta or his contemplation of the *Police Gazette*, a publication which terrified and fascinated him, would jump up and don his immaculate coat, light the spirit lamp which he kept in the pantry, and fumble hurriedly for cups and spoons, rushing to the front door in the nick of time to let the callers in, bowing and scraping and counting at the same time, to see if he had the right amount of china laid out.

To each and every one, no matter what their form of attack—and Isabel was aware that she was in a social game of skill, at once as rigidly stylized as a bullfight—she was demure and non-committal, gracious and self-effacing. When the callers left, they had nothing into which to set their teeth. The worst that they could say about her was that she was a sly minx. The men of each family pooh-poohed that idea, laying the thought to feminine jealousy, so that, having nothing on which to feed, the rumours of scandal soon weakened and perished.

Evan and Jonah came home, bursting with so much news of their travels that any awkwardness they might have felt was easily concealed, although Isabel was annoyed and uncomfortable to find Evan's bright ironic stare upon her whenever she turned.

ISABEL

Evan had learned to play the banjo somewhere in his peregrinations and sat on the steps in the moonlight twanging sentimental ballads or singing street songs in execrable French. One night he and Isabel sat close together, as Jonah, resting his aching leg, lay along the porch boards and stroked the ears of the hound. Under his breath Evan sang teasingly:

'Now listen, all you girls, when you go to choose a man,
Don't take one who is ancient, get a young one if you can.
For an old man he is old, and an old man he is grey,
But a young man knows just how to love—
Get away, old man, get away!

'You want to find a young man with healthy rosy cheeks,
For if an old man gets the rheumatiz he stays in bed for weeks.
For an old man he is old, and an old man he is grey,
But a young man knows just how to love—
Get away, old man, get away!

'I wouldn't marry an old man. I'll tell you the reason why.
Tobacco juice is on his lips and his chin is very dry.
For an old man——'

Isabel cried, 'Hush! *Hush!*' and, jumping up with her hands over her ears, ran into the house. Evan laughed and strummed on his banjo, but Jonah, rolling over and putting his face in the crook of his arm, felt sick with misery.

All summer long Lucile had lived in a state of troubled emotion. She had felt more than anyone the strain between the two houses. Ransome, whose work took him into the city each day, did not miss the contacts with Riverridge unbearably. Lucile suspected he strolled over in the evenings more often than he told her when, because Lucile did not like the smell of his pipe, he went outdoors for a final smoke. She fought against dwelling on whether or not Isabel was the attraction and tried to tell herself that Ran had always enjoyed talking with her father, that it was the most natural thing in the world that the men of the family should get together and discuss business. Yet always in her mind was a creeping doubt like a fine annoying hair that blows across one's face to spoil complete comfort. She missed her father grievously, ✓

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not only his physical presence, but their congeniality, which was now destroyed by the unmentioned but nevertheless vivid feeling between them about Isabel.

She missed the freedom of the house itself, for like Tremont she was sensitive to atmosphere and often hungered for the old place. Standing at the edge of the woods beyond Jennifer's garden, she sometimes stared at the gracious beauty of house and grounds, lonely and longing and bitter, until tears blurred her vision and she turned and went hurriedly through the woods lest she be seen crying.

She longed with all her heart for the free intercourse of the old days, but her pride and her hurt would not let her relax her rigid self-denial. At the same time she seemed stubborn and slightly silly to herself and was overcome with anger and self-pity. She felt that she was the only one in the family who had upheld dignity, and yet, in the face of the inconveniences and sacrifices which upholding it entailed, dignity seemed a frail and outmoded thing to fling about one.

Lucile would have liked to pour out her heart to Dorothy, whose letters, brief and far between, were of nothing but gay good times, but she felt that Dorothy would either be driven to champion Isabel, if her mother were too outspoken, or that she, Lucile, would be guilty of making Dorothy take a stand as hard and as uncompromising as her own. She wanted Dorothy to dislike Isabel as much as she did. But she had suffered enough from her own aloofness to hesitate to forbid Dorothy's going to Riverridge. For estrangement from Isabel meant estrangement from Tremont and Jonah, and Lucile was not quite prepared to demand that from her daughter. She even had moments of misgiving as to whether she could force Dorothy to stay away from Riverridge, even if she wished to do so.

Bitter as she was, she did not condemn her father, and spent long sleepless hours when the insects cried into the hot summer darkness, wishing that she had not taken such a determined stand, wishing that she had listened to Virginia Perry, and had

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accepted Isabel at least publicly, wishing that Tremont would come to her and break down her reserve. She pictured melodramatic scenes in which Isabel, overcome by the enormity of her callousness, came and weepingly threw herself on Lucile's mercy. She knew these wishful musings to be absurd, for she had nothing that Isabel either needed or wanted. In fact, the girl probably welcomed her absence, as it eliminated any possibility of Lucile's interfering with her management of the place.

These shapeless yearnings and miseries floated in and out of Lucile's mind in almost all of her waking moments and haunted her dreams. None of her emotions were clearly cut or had the virtue of satisfying her. She felt misused, abandoned, and lonely, yet to herself she seemed hard and mean and stupidly uncompromising; and that picture of herself hurt her as much as Isabel's own defection.

As the time for Dorothy's homecoming approached, her unhappiness and anxiety increased, and when, on the morning before Dorothy was to arrive, young Ran broke out with a feverish rash, her anxiety over the baby was alleviated by the exultant thought, 'If it's catching, we'll be quarantined. I can forbid her going over to see them!'

And 'catching' it proved to be. The baby had measles and was so ill that Dorothy, by this time hungry for the sight and company of her family, took it as a personal affront when she was hustled off to school a whole week ahead of time, and kept under strict surveillance in one wing of the school until all danger of breaking out with the disease was over. Lutie came down with a light case of it and Jonah came over and read to her. With her eyes bandaged against the light, she lay in the hammock on the wide porch while Jonah read *To-To* and *To-To's Merry Winter*, *The Gentle Heritage*, and a set of asinine books which were Lutie's delight, about Dorothy Dainty and her incredible companions.

In the pear trees the wasps and honeybees buzzed and fought, the late apples dropped with rich thuds and the mocking-birds sang as if by singing they could keep autumn ever in abeyance.

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Upstairs little Ran whimpered fretfully or bawled with rage and pain, and Letha rocked in a squeaky chair and sang,

'Oh, rock-a mah soul in de bosom of Abraham,
Rock-a mah soul in de bosom of Abraham,
Roch-a-mah soul in de bosom of Abraham,
Oh—rock-a mah soul!

When Ah went down in de valley to pray—
Oh, rock-a-mah soul!
My soul got happy an' Ah stayed all day—
Oh! Rock-a mah soul!'

But the sick got well and the autumn came. Evan went back to his college and only he and Isabel knew how far his faun-like pursuit of her had succeeded. Dorothy, still feeling insulted, turned her back on the whole family and made passionate friendships with the girls at school. Jonah, having learned his lesson about not seizing the material at hand, in questioning Jennifer while she was alive, made a more earnest effort to be aware of what went on at school and filled more notebooks with impressions, descriptions, and youthful philosophy. The notes he had collected on Jennifer he sorted carefully, a few at a time, loving the work, reliving his days in Cornwall and feeling as yet inadequate to the task of creating a novel.

The leaves turned and the November rains came, washing them down in torrents. Lutie went to school wearing pigtails, carrying a pencil-box and an apple. Into the house and barn poured the crops that had been harvested. The first frosts came, spreading a hoar over the land, and the shrill, despairing squeals of the hogs rang out. The waxy carcasses hung on stout cross-poles, while the hot blood gushed from cloven throats and poured in scarlet splashes into holes cut in the brown earth. The trees were bare and the leaves lay thick and damp underfoot, brown and richly pungent. Then came the first flurry of snow and the long, long year since Jennifer had gone was ended.

A week before Christmas, and the day on which Dorothy was to come home for her winter vacation, Tremont dressed in his hunt-

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ing-clothes, took his gun and went along the road between River-ridge and the Parks' house which Ran and Lucile had lately christened, 'The Chimneys.' He had no intention of going hunting, but because he did have a definite purpose in view which he did not want Isabel to suspect, he carried the gun and whistled up the two hounds, who leaped with misguided delight at the sight of it.

That whole summer and fall the coolness between the two houses had lain like a light snow on his heart. At Riverridge Isabel had made no mention of any of the Parks family. She had spoken to Lutie when the child had appeared in the hall or on the porch, and she had said, 'That's nice,' when Tremont had mentioned that he had taken some garden stuff to Lucile. But she never asked why Lucile had not called, she never suggested going to the Parks' home. The Sunday family dinners that had been as much a part of their lives as breathing simply had not been resumed on the Tremonts' return from New Orleans. The first Sunday had set a pattern for the rest. Isabel and Tremont had driven to church (where he could feel the glances and raised eyebrows, the innuendoes on shaped, silent lips, as keenly as if they had been tangible missiles hurled about him), and had driven home, after Isabel had bowed graciously to a slightly distraught congregation. They had eaten an excellent dinner, just the two of them, talking across a bowl of shell-pink roses; and afterwards they had walked awhile on the lawn and inspected the new turkeys. Tremont had admired Isabel's poise and wondered if she were hurt at the family's indifference, while in his own heart a small sore spot grew larger and larger, until it seemed by the end of the summer that he could bear the discomfort no longer.

And now on this bright winter day he had set out, determined to put an end to an unendurable situation.

At Lucile's he set his gun against the house and went up on the porch, to the bewilderment of the hounds, who stood and watched him impatiently. He rang the bell, but opened the door and went

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in as he did so, as if he feared that in waiting his courage for the task in hand might melt away.

A fire burned on the hearth and against crisp curtains holly and mistletoe hung to welcome Dorothy and Christmas. Tremont went to the hearth and, pulling off his gloves, held his hands out to the fire. He wore a short hunting-jacket and a peaked cap, which he took off now and hung on the back of a chair. Lucille, coming from the rear of the house with little Ran on her arm, saw him and was startled.

'Why, Father! I didn't know you were here!' The baby chortled and held out his arms saying, 'Dampa! Dampa!' bouncing so that Lucille had to struggle to hold him.

'Put that great hulking thing down and let him walk,' said Tremont. 'He's too heavy for you to carry about.'

He noticed that she looked flushed and tired and that in her eyes, in spite of the fact that she smiled proudly at Ran's attempts to talk, there lay a still sadness, a leaden unhappiness like that in his own heart.

'Get Letha to take him,' he commanded. 'I want to talk over something with you.'

She looked at him apprehensively and without a word took little Ran to the kitchen, where Tremont heard him laughing and beating on a pan with a spoon all the while he and Lucille talked.

When she returned, Tremont was standing with his back to the fire, rocking on his heels.

'What is it?' she asked, but she knew with a fearful certainty.

'I want you and your family to come to Riverridge for Christmas dinner,' he said abruptly, and thought, '*That wasn't the way I meant to start this at all.*'

'But——' Lucille sat down and stared into the fire. 'Does Isabel want us? After all, it's her house now.'

'It's nobody's house—not any one of us, I mean. It's *the house*. It always was and always will be—the family's house. It's only half alive without a big family in it. Isabel keeps it beautifully. She is the soul of kindness—but——' He sat down and took her

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hand in his as he had that terrible day when she had gone last to Riverridge. 'I miss you. I miss having the children in and out. I miss Ran and his nonsense. I miss *you*. I know—to some extent at least—how you feel about Isabel. You think she is—well, not exactly an adventuress, but a calculating, scheming person. She isn't. I think she was a badly frightened girl. She had no home, no training to look after herself—and she had an opportunity to get it all with a few decided disadvantages, the chief being myself. She loves Riverridge. You couldn't see her there and know the care and pride she shows about it, and not know that the place is dear to her. And she is consideration itself. A lot of young girls, if they had been what you think Isabel is, would have been indifferent or even cruel to an old man they had married for his money or for a home. But she isn't. She puts me before everything else and does a dozen things a day for my comfort and pleasure.'

As he said it his voice took on a tone of wonder, as if the miracle of her kindness were still bewildering to him. While Lucile, her face darkening with sullenness, thought: *'Of course she is. She knows he has too many friends who would ruin her if she didn't treat him well. She's working far even more than she has now—she has some plan, some good reason.'* And her father, looking up at her, eager to be understood, saw that she was more stubborn than ever. He realized that he was doing the wrong thing by praising one woman to another who loved him, and he dropped her hand, stretching out in his chair with assumed indifference, and said: 'Even if she were calculating, you can hardly blame her. Having a house like Riverridge laid in her lap. You'll have to blame me for that. Besides, I'm not asking you to like her. I'm only asking you not to take the attitude you have because it's unfair to so many other people.'

'To whom?' asked Lucile in a tight voice.

'To the children, for some.' He leaned forward and looked at her earnestly. 'All my life I've thought of *the house* as a part of us, as something shared and loved between us. It's seemed to me

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to have taken on some of the personality, some of the very life, of all the fine and good people who have lived in it. To me, River-ridge is as alive as I am. But it can't stay alive without life in it. Isabel and I live there like two dolls in a doll house. It's too quiet, too *lonely*. Jonah's away all day and in his books at night. Anyway, the house itself has something to offer. Your children should come up loving it as I do. They do love it. They'd come back tomorrow if you'd let them. It ought to be as much a home to them as this one—more so, for it is the home of their forefathers. It's the only place they knew Jennifer. Their impressions of her will be lost if they never come there. Even now Lutie slips in and out like a little ghost——'

'Of course it's all my fault!' cried Lucile with passion. 'It's my fault that Isabel has never liked Lutie. It's my fault that you married her and outraged every vestige of dignity the family had. It's my fault that the house is closed to the children——'

She burst into tears, and Tremont jumped up and began to pace the floor.

'*I knew it would end this way,*' he thought miserably. '*I should never have come and I should never have attempted to explain. I should have written to her and let her get all this out of mind before I saw her.*'

He picked up his cap and fingered it, hoping that she would look up, but she sobbed on and on, fumbling at her belt for a handkerchief, burying her face in her hands while her shoulders shook and her sobs grew hoarse and racking.

He started to leave, but thought, '*If I do, nothing will have been settled and the whole situation will be worse than it was before.*' Distasteful as the task was, he knew that there was nothing to do but to see it through to the end, and, placing the cap back on the chair, he sat down again to wait unhappily until she could get control of herself. At last when her sobs had died away, he said: 'Lucy, you are making things not only very hard but very bitter for me. I suffered as no one will ever know when your mother died. But I comforted myself with the thought that now I would have time to know you better. For a while I did, although you

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were absorbed with your own family and home. Now I'm not sure that I want to. Because I did something that I thought it my duty to do, because a homeless girl took advantage of an opportunity to be taken care of, you smugly condemn us both; and because I ask you to try to be a little more lenient, not to deny your children a part of the beauty of their heritage, you burst into a storm of tears and recriminations. It doesn't make a very pretty picture, does it? I'm not asking you to come back to Riverridge because I want you to be nice to Isabel. I do want you to be. And I want her to be pleasant to you. I'm sure she will be. I'm asking you to come back so that Jonah and Dorothy, Lutie and little Ran, can feel the sense of security and strength which a steady stream of life in one place invariably gives, so that *the house* may mean something to them, so that they can know me and remember your mother and be familiar with the customs and things that were hers. If you care so little for me that you're willing to cut me off from them and from yourself, if you are so stubborn and hard that you're willing to have the family divided, the children made uncomfortable and furtive in our relationships, if you're so self-centred that only your own hurt pride means anything to you—then I can do nothing. But I want to say this, Lucile'—she thought she had never seen his face so stern, the long, lean lines so deep and sad—'I want to say this. I do not envy you your thoughts as the years go on. I don't envy you what you'll feel years hence when it's too late to do anything, ever—to make amends.'

She rose now and looked at him, her face ravished and tragic.

'You're not fair!' she cried despairingly. 'You're not fair! You do what *you* please. Isabel gets what *she* wants, and all I get is the blame! I have to come crawling to my own mother's house; I have to make all the advances; I get blamed for all the unpleasantness when all in the world I want is to maintain some standard of living, some dignity, some ideal.'

'There is no greater ideal than the ideal of an unbroken home, Lucile. And Riverridge is your father's house, and you've never

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had to crawl to him. You certainly don't have to crawl to Isabel. You know perfectly well that I wouldn't sanction any rudeness on anyone's part, to you. But Isabel has borne your indifference to her without a word of complaint. She has seen me shut off from the family and lonely without one hint that the fault was not my own. She has run my house capably, shared my pleasures and been interested in my tasks. If anyone has met this situation with dignity, I think it has probably been Isabel. It hasn't been an easy job for her, either.'

'She's had everything on her side,' said Lucile, her cheek twitching. 'She came here with nothing and everything's simply been poured into her lap. No wonder she can be smooth and cool and pleasant.'

'Do you suffer for the lack of anything?' asked Tremont, sudden anger chilling him.

'I suffer for the misery I've been made to feel, the scandal and the gossip, the feeling that there is a stranger in my mother's house!'

'If there has been any *scandal*, I am unaware of it,' said Tremont, and Lucile was reminded of Isabel's words which Ran had brought back to her—'*Is there any reason to think that our marriage will be any less decent, any less legal, than anybody else's?*'

'I can't understand her,' she said, as if to herself.

'And if there is any gossip, your own lack of co-operation can but add to it. You've made a mountain out of a molehill. The marriage was a practical answer to an uncomfortable situation. I am satisfied. Isabel's satisfied. Jonah is satisfied—you are the only one who has kept on trying to make it impossible.'

She was silent a long time, looking into the fire. The tears which dried on her cheeks in the fire's heat itched and stung, and she wiped them away with a hand that trembled so that he was moved. He went and took her in his arms, wiping her face with his handkerchief, and kissing her on the temple where her hair waved softly.

'Don't make yourself so miserable,' he said gently. 'Let's

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forget everything but that we love each other. Try to think of the whole thing impersonally. You'll be so much happier if only you'll let yourself be. Dorothy'll be home tonight. She doesn't know how strained and sad it's been between us. Let's let her never know. Let's let her never long to be in Riverridge as I know you have longed.'

She stirred and turned towards him, her face against the familiar hunting-jacket, her heart melting suddenly within her at the old feel of his love sweeping around her.

She cried now, but softly, as though the ice in her heart melted into tears like the tears in a fairy-tale.

'Let's be free and happy again,' he said. 'Things are only as bad as we think they are. Let's pretend we're all one happy, united family and let's just be natural and kind again.'

He stopped, overcome by his own love for her, and in a moment she raised her head and kissed him, full on the lips.

'I'll try,' she said, as she had said many times as a child. 'I'll do my part.'

'Dear Lucy,' he answered huskily, 'you can't know how much it means to me. It won't be hard, I promise you, and it will be so good to have you all around me again.'

He left then, and she watched him go, physically spent with tears and with the washed-out hate and fury she had felt. But she felt happier than she had since her mother's death, happier and somehow cleaner.

A group of children walking through the woods sang lustily,

'God rest you merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay;
For Jesus Christ, our Saviour,
Was born this Christmas Day!'

Their voices, borne over the cold air, came faint and crisp into the house like the fragrance of a good apple. They seemed to lift the last small cloud from her heart, and Lucile, running upstairs, sang huskily but with sudden, fragile happiness,

'For Jesus Christ, our Sav-i-our,
Was born this Christmas Day!'

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Tremont, leaving Lucile's, picked up his gun and looked about for the dogs. They had evidently given him up as a bad companion and gone home. They'd come crawling out from under the kitchen, wriggling and grinning apologetically, when he got back to Riverridge, trying to explain with flopping tails and lolling tongues that they had at last understood that he didn't really want them along. He hoped Isabel wouldn't see them and wonder what he was doing without them.

He thought of Isabel and Lucile. He was glad he had gone to his daughter, relieved that as far as possible the tension between them was broken. It would always be there like a pane of glass between two people. They would make the proper motions, but much of what they said would never penetrate and they could never really touch each other. But perhaps if the amenities were preserved long enough the tension would grow fainter and fainter until at last it would not be noticeable.

It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell Lucile that he had deeded Riverridge to her. In the case of his death he wanted no contention, and he knew Isabel well enough now to know that she would go to almost any length to keep the house. It should stay in the family—that was his dearest wish—and Lucile's children and her children's children should know and love its spacious lights and shadows, its warm and stately beauty.

But he had not told her because he had been afraid that in some way it would influence her, and he wanted her to make the gesture out of her love of him and out of her own sense of right. He'd give her the deed Christmas, some time when they were alone. He smiled, thinking of her amazement and emotion.

He knew how the Christmas dinner would be. The Ransome Parks would arrive late, Dorothy would come in breathless and full of laughter, Evan and his father, down for the holidays, would help to ease the strain, to bury it in a confusion of personalities. But the young people, Dorothy, Lutie, Jonah, and Evan, would be the most help—he no longer classed Isabel with them in his mind, he knew now the depths of her maturity, the lengths of

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her complete poise—the young people were always full of life, of happy interests.

‘Praise the Lord for children!’ he said fervently, and turned his face upward to catch the first falling flakes against his warm cheek. The grey sky was closed and down-pressing, the world was wrapped in a cotton-wool silence. He suddenly felt lonely and cold and stopped a moment, looking up.

‘God keep us!’ he murmured, but it was not to God he spoke, but to Jennifer, yearning for her approval of all he’d done, missing her at this season which had always been so exciting to her, feeling near to her in spite of the thick greyness about him, near and very dear.

He moved on, putting the gun over his shoulder and stepping along briskly as he had once in those terrible years when River-ridge had been ravished. He did not think of them now—he thought of the house as Isabel kept it, furnished and glowing and warm and bright. He thought of her lack of demonstrativeness with gratitude—no tears, no scenes from her, just calmness and a knack of always being where she was wanted. He could not get home soon enough, to assure himself that everything in his house was in order. He’d have a drink, he thought, of rich mellow whiskey, he’d open a bottle of the very best to celebrate the reunion of his family, and he’d sit by the fire in the library and relax until lunch-time. It was good to be able to come and go freely, to enjoy simple pleasures. It seemed to him that his life had fallen in pleasant ways.

On the top step of the veranda he turned back, to look again at the sky. The snow was falling with a little hissing noise. On the porch the hounds, as he had expected, grovelled and yammered. But all else in the world was still. When he looked at the house he could see, through gleaming, white-curtained windows, the firelight leaping on the walls. He turned from the steps and went in, closing the door behind him carefully.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE holidays at Riverridge without Jennifer gave a fresh impetuosity to Jonah's desire to give her immortality through his own words. He determined that he would keep at his note-taking more consistently and begin to get his material into shape against the time when he should feel capable of writing the book.

He thought of Virgie and wondered how he had overlooked such an obvious source of material. After Evan and his father had gone home and Jonah had still a few days on his hands, he decided, one crisp afternoon, to walk over to Fairhaven.

He found the house closed, and stood for a long while waiting for an answer to his knock. At last an unkempt Pink fumbled at the door and unlocked it, saying, 'I thought I hyeared somebody, but I couldn't mek sho. Don't nobody come hyere no mo'. I'se sho glad to see you, Mistuh Jonah.'

The Negro was thin and lifeless, as if he had not been well, and Jonah, looking about the chill, dreary house, had a sudden horrified thought that perhaps Virgie and Ward were actually in need.

'Miss Virgie in her room,' said Pink as he took Jonah's coat. 'You knock on de do' an' go rat in. She'll be mighty proud to see yuh.'

Jonah stood shivering in the cold hall for a moment until Virgie called, 'Come in.'

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'It's Jonah, Miss Virgie,' he called before he opened the door, and he heard her rise and the sound of her glad voice as he turned the knob.

'Bless you!' she cried, kissing him. 'What brings you to see a lonely old woman?'

The room was bright and warm. A fire crackled in the grate, and although there was a clutter of things, calendars from feed stores, family photographs, vases filled with paper spills, gloves among a pile of magazines in one corner, it wore a sense of cleanliness and order that the rest of the house did not have.

The red setter, stiff and indifferent, lay on the hearth. He rolled a pale eye at Jonah and blew through scornful nostrils, keeping his head on his paws.

'Two things,' said Jonah in answer to Virgie's question. 'I hadn't seen you in a coon's age—and I wanted to talk about Grandmother.'

Virgie's face fell into lines of sadness.

'Jennifer. You were her favourite child.'

Jonah knew that Virgie did not have him confused with his father's generation. She meant that Jennifer's maternalism extended to all young people, and that of all the children who had slept and played and suffered at Riverridge, Jonah had been dearest to her heart.

'I—I'm going to write a book about her some day,' he said diffidently as he sat on the edge of the chair she waved him to. He wondered if he would ever get over feeling like a fool when he spoke of wanting to write.

'You mean a "life"?' Virgie asked over the match she held to her cigarette.

'No.' He looked at her appealingly as if begging her not to laugh at him. 'You know I've always wanted to write. She wanted me to, too. Well, some day, maybe not for years, but *some* day when I feel I know more about people, have been around more—you know we live a "sheltered life" at River-

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ridge—well, then I'm going to write a novel about a woman like Jennifer.'

Virgie said nothing, watching him with keen, casual eyes.

'That's why I went to England last summer. I wanted to see the places where she'd stood and walked and eaten and slept—and it's all there!' he added in naïve wonder and delight. 'The house, the garden, the streets, aren't changed at all, they told me. I could see her there as a girl, so tall and beautiful. She was beautiful, wasn't she?'

'She was very lovely,' agreed Virgie, 'but she would have been wonderful if she'd been as homely as mud. She had spark, vitality, somethin'. It wasn't charm, because she was too frank and outspoken. I think it was simply a zest for livin', an *unde-featedness*. She was wasted as a woman with money. She could have been a pioneer woman literally clearin' a way in the wilderness. Death and destruction couldn't stop her—she carried everybody around her and along with her.'

There was a long pause, and Virgie said, 'Of course you know she *married* your grandfather. He was devoted to her, but I don't think Johnny ever knew what hit him after she laid eyes on him. She told me once that she had never wanted anything in her life badly enough but that she got it, and that she wanted Johnny worse than anything she'd ever seen. He made her radiantly happy until the day she died. I hope he's happy now,' she added in a different tone.

Jonah looked at her from under his brows. He wondered if she resented, for Jennifer's sake, his grandfather's second, strange marriage.

'He is,' he said, after a moment. 'Not "radiantly," you know, but—contented. Isabel's awfully good to him. She keeps things going smoothly and doesn't play on his sympathies the way a lot of young wives might. She never acts like a baby. You know, in a way, she's like Grandmother.'

Virgie drew her forehead into a wrinkle of mock amazement.

'She is. She knows what she wants and she goes after it. She

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doesn't have Grandmother's interest in life—or her brains—but she has a single purposeness—she's a realist, and I think Grandmother recognized it.'

'I once thought that she might be settin' her cap for you,' said Virgie, grinning. 'How about it?'

To his chagrin Jonah felt the colour rising in his face. Then he laughed and said frankly.

'I admit that I was bowled over at first—she's beautiful—beautiful without much vivacity. She's the kind that needs her beauty to attract attention. But the very perfection of her beauty sort of puts me off—and then I wouldn't have stood a chance with her. She wouldn't have been interested in a lame dreamer. She——'

He stopped and remembered where the words which were on the tip of his tongue had already been spoken—'The night Sibby died, Isabel and I went down to her cabin to see her. She said then that Isabel only wanted things and that she meant to have them "no matter what." I think she was right. I think Isabel has very little warmth, and that things, the things money can buy, mean a great deal to her.'

'I feel sure that is true,' said Virgie, remembering Ward's brief courtship of her, and sighed.

'I shouldn't be discussing her,' said Jonah shamefacedly, 'and I wouldn't anywhere else. But you—you've always known what went on in our family. You're almost like Grandmother to me.'

Virgie's eyes filled with tears.

'You couldn't have said a sweeter thing to me,' she said huskily.

'Do you remember the first time you saw her—Grandmother, I mean?' asked Jonah, embarrassed by Virgie's tears.

'Indeed I do. She was out on the front porch—we'd heard Johnny had got married, and Luther and I drove over; she was directing three lazy coloured boys who were making a rose trellis. She had on a yellow dress (she always loved yellow). Her throat was so white and her cheeks were on fire, she was so mad about

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something they'd done. She was givin' them the very devil when she looked up and saw us. She just paused long enough to get her breath and then she finished what she had to say. The next minute she burst out laughin' at her own temper and came runnin' down the steps to meet us. I loved her from that minute and—I've loved her ever since.'

He remembered then that he had heard her tell this before, and while she talked now his mind went back to one of his first memories of her. It was shortly after he had come to Riverridge, when he was quite a small and still unhappy boy. She had ridden over one morning on the way to a field try and he had looked up from the lawn to see her seated on a roan horse that looked ten feet high to a six-year-old. She had had red cheeks herself then, or rather pink, and the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. Her hair, wavy and reddish-brown, blew out under her mannish hat, and as the horse moved about cropping grass, she swayed with it in an undulant motion that fascinated him. She was talking to his grandfather, who stood on the steps to be on her level, and she was saying, 'I've got a pointer that can't be beat in seven counties. You've never seen such poise—she'll run all day, never tires, and a finder such as you won't come across in a blue moon! You've got to come out and watch her, Johnny—why, I've named the dog Jennifer just to please you!'

He could hear his grandfather's ringing laugh and see the way Virgie leaned forward and laid her gloved hand on his shoulder. In the yard the other field watchers, dog trainers, and prospective buyers, milled and churned about, and the dogs ran between the legs of the horses or lay panting on the thick shady grass. He had not thought of that scene since then—and now he smiled reminiscently and Virgie thought he smiled remembering Jennifer.

A half-hour later he rose to go. He had not seen Ward, and some fear that the question might be embarrassing to her made him afraid to ask about him. He left her with promises to come back—and with every intention of doing so, for her hunger for

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companionship was apparent, and he had felt closer to Jennifer here than any place he had been since her death.

He cut across the yard and headed for the road through the fields. At the barn Pink was feeding a small brood of chickens and from the stable door Ward's mare whinnied wistfully. Jonah, shy but driven by a desperate need to know, stopped and said to Pink: 'Tell me, Pink. How is Miss Virgie getting along? Is she worried? Is she having a hard time?'

And Pink, looking furtively towards the house, answered: 'Deed she am, boss. She'd skin me and tack mah hide on de barn do' ef she knowed I tole you, but what wid Mr. Ward drinkin' hisse'f to death, an' de money mos' gone, Miss Virgie 'bout to go crazy.'

Jonah bit his lip and moved away slowly. 'Thanks,' he said unhappily and limped carefully through the rough yard.

All the way home his heart lay heavy and sore within him as he thought of Virgie facing practical starvation there alone, among her memories of Luther and the gaiety that Fairhaven had once known. He wondered where Ward got the money for liquor, and he thought of the empty stables, the silent house. Even the beagles were gone, and the lack of their affable noisiness left a melancholy vacuum. He wondered how many quarts of Scotch or rye they had fetched, and anger rose up like a flame and consumed his misery. At home he sought Tremont out and told him what he had found.

'We can't let that go on,' said Tremont, his eyes dark with pity. 'I'll go to town tomorrow and make some sort of arrangement. We'll fix up some fake investments—Virgie doesn't know beans about money—and tell her the interest on them is due her. She'll take a cheque from Luther's lawyer without question. I'll send her a hundred a month—and remember, in case I forget to put this in my will, Jonah; this must be kept up as long as Virgie lives. I trust you to see to it.'

'You know I will, sir,' answered Jonah, too happy to say more. 'I only hope she doesn't give it all to Ward.'

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'I'll tell Newsome to go out there and suggest that she not let Ward know she is getting that much. I think she'll agree to deceive him for his own good. His drinking bothers her as much as it does anybody. Those damned children of hers! Any one of them could take care of her if they had an ounce of self-control or common sense.'

'Sort of a sour version of bread upon the waters, isn't it?' said Jonah. 'She and Mr. Perry raised 'em to be extravagant and selfish—and now she's suffering for it. But she wouldn't take it, if they wanted her to, or had it to give to her. She's so independent. Why, I don't believe she'd had enough to eat! When can the cheque be sent to her?' he asked, suddenly anxious again.

'Tomorrow. I'll call Newsome tonight and talk to him and he can drive out tomorrow and deliver it. It will take a little planning and ingenuity to get the money transferred to the firm and the cheque made out as from them, but he's used to things of this sort—it's what he's paid for. I think you can rest easy tonight, Jo; Virgie will be made much happier tomorrow.'

'Thanks—thank you, sir,' said Jonah again and went out quickly.

Perhaps if he had not had the urge of his writing, Jonah's impulse to see Virgie again might have died, as so many of our better impulses do. But he did go again and again that winter and spring, usually on Sunday afternoons. And while they did not always speak of Jennifer, Virgie's comments and folk-tales enchanted him and gave him a background of his own that years later he often blessed her for.

Sometimes they walked together and she would point out old landmarks or make a caustic comment on a neighbour.

'There goes Lucy Spearman,' she said one day as an erect old lady drove past in a buggy, 'the first woman in these parts to ride astride. Shocked everybody. It was bad enough that she straddled the horse, but worse than that—she didn't use a stirrup. There was somethin' vulgar about mountin' a horse *from the ground*—! That was eschewin' feminine helplessness too much, I reckon.

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'That's the old Fitzhugh house. They came from Virginia and always lived in Tennessee as if it revolted 'em slightly. Old James Fitzhugh got senile in his old age. Wouldn't walk downstairs because he said he had glass legs and he might break 'em. He had a sort of chair rigged up outside of his window, and winter and summer he had a Negro man let him down with a sort of pulley arrangement. I don't suppose he ever thought what would happen to him and his glass legs if the contraption broke!'

And Jonah, writing in his room at night, thought, Some day someone will point out Riverridge and say, 'That's where the Tremonts lived. The old lady died and the old man married a beautiful hussy six months later,' and perhaps they would add other apocryphal stories and no one would ever know the truth. And his heart sank when he recognized the hopelessness of ever genuinely catching and holding an era that is past. He determined to write, then, as truthfully as he could always, to show life as he knew it as nearly as possible.

Once Virgie said, 'Listen; there's a wood dove. They always sound just like they look to me, soft and sorter greyish-brown.'

On some days she was full of talk about dogs and horses, and after he left her he would be light with the excitement of meets and hunts, and he would have still in his ears, as if he had actually heard them, the sound of the dogs' baying, of the hooves of the horses in the soft turf or ringing on the frozen roads, the shouts of the hunters, the laughter and talk around the open fire.

Always after he had been with her he went home and wrote furiously, knowing that this was the very warp and woof of a way of life, the pattern of which was irretrievably unravelled a little more with the passing of each one of her generation. Years afterwards, he was not only to remember the things she told him, the knowledge of his people that she gave him, but the woman herself walking sturdily beside him, sitting in the firelight or on the porch of the shabby, almost paintless house, talking and glowing with her memories. It was then that Jonah began to

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love all old people who, stripped of passion and done with striving, seemed filled with a dry wine of wisdom and humour mellow and satisfying.

He seldom saw Ward, and when he did he left Fairhaven depressed and angry, being newly aware each time of what Virgie endured. For Ward had lost any ambition to maintain appearances. He went about shabby and dirty, bleary-eyed and in a stupor, his good looks and charm lost under a layer of unhealthy fat and an expression of drunken bewilderment. One spring afternoon Jonah found him sitting on a wheelbarrow by the side of the barn, his face in his hands. Tears trickled between his fingers and he sobbed with long-drawn-out hoarseness that shocked Jonah.

Pink, standing by with an expression of baffled unhappiness on his face, motioned Jonah out of Ward's hearing and then said, 'Dat Slaton Gillespie done collected Mistuh Ward's mare fer a' ol' debt. He say ef Mistuh Ward don' give him de mare he goner come over hyere an' shoot it out wid him, and you know, Mistuh Jonah, Mistuh Ward couldn't hit de side o' dishyere barn now.'

'What in the world did Ward owe Slate for?' asked Jonah. 'You can't drink up a thousand dollars—or most people couldn't.'

'Seem lak Mistuh Ward borried dat money to pay back some mo' money he borried fum diffunt folks—seem lak Mistuh Ward jes' all de time havin' money trubble. But he love' dat mare lak a chile—I reckon he jes' gone sho 'nuff, now. He'd been plannin' to breed dat mare an' mek back what he owe, but Mistuh Gillespie so damn mad now, he say, he ain't goner listen to no mo' excuses an' he ain't goner wait fer no colt to pay de debt. Miss Virgie goner throw a fit when she hyear it! I reckon she'll go over dere an' bring dat mare back.'

'But she can't—if Ward really owes Slate. He can sue Ward!'

'Miss Virgie think what Mistuh Ward says is de t'ing to do,' said Pink doggedly. 'I reckon she'll go over dere an' try.'

And Jonah, walking home, depressed again, marvelled that a

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woman like Virgie could have so much sense and fineness and still be so weak on one subject; and he sighed to think how complex were these creatures he must spend his life delineating.

Spring came. The corn grew as calmly as though time were not running away, never to be caught again, the fruit blossoms fell and fruit was formed, and heavy, sweet stillness of summer lay over Riverridge once more.

Evan and Dorothy were home again and the house's quiet was broken by their voices, the sound of music and laughter. Jonah would have been unfeignedly happy except for two things, his anxiety about Ward and Virgie, their physical and spiritual disintegration, and the fact that Isabel seemed to have fallen seriously in love with Evan.

Jonah wondered if the others in the two households noticed what he did, that Isabel's eyes went to Evan's face whenever he was near her, that she had become dreamy and unaccountable, and that her poise, so long maintained, was shattered whenever Evan spoke. Apparently, the family, having a definite conception of Isabel, were blind to any changes in it. Isabel was cold, Isabel was not impulsive, Isabel was satisfied with material possessions, Isabel was completely absorbed in her devotion to Riverridge. This picture of her was so impressed upon them that they accepted it and looked no further. But Jonah, who was with the two of them most, felt their excitement like an electric current and he burned with anger at them for deceiving his grandfather and with a horror of their discovery and its consequences.

One night they sat, with Dorothy and Lutie, on the end of the porch which looked out over the river bottom. The knoll with the house was in the heavy shadows of the trees, but all round them the milky-blue moonlight lay in patches and the fields which stretched down to the river were frosted with a ghostly silver.

On the steps which went down from the end of the porch to the yard, someone started singing, 'Carry me back to old Virginia,' and the rest joined in. The music, plaintive and slow, seemed to

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hang in the air like a mist. From the river bottom the night breeze brought the smell of rich earth and of growing things. Jonah lay back against the steps feeling the breeze lift his hair from his forehead like a caress. Evan struck a match, and in its flare Jonah saw Isabel as pale as the moon in her white dress, sitting against one of the columns, her head back and her eyes closed. There was a look of utter contentment in the smile that curved her lips. One hand lay on Evan's knee as though she were unaware of it. Evan, cupping his pipe to shelter the flame, shook out the match with one hand, took the other from around his pipe and laid it on Isabel's as though it had been there a long while before. The whole place went black for Jonah, as if his anger had come forth in an inky cloud and obscured everything for him. He was sick with the idea that Tremont, farther back on the porch, might have seen them. Suddenly he could bear sitting by them no longer. He got up and flung off toward the fields and the stables, walking doggedly into the moonlight as if he might drown himself in the silvery fog.

For a long time he stood in the roadway which ran at the edge of the fields, the road to Lucile's house, and stared down into the misty river bottom. At last calmness came to him, a lessening of his rage. He limped back, knowing that someone had to walk through the woods with Dorothy and Lutie and that it should not be Evan and Isabel, who would then come home alone in the moonlight. He tried to tell himself that the gestures between them were too casual to mean anything, that Evan had always kissed her in a cousinly fashion when he came and went, and he recalled what Isabel had said just a little more than a year ago on such a night as this: *'If there is any scandal it won't be because I met my step-son-in-law in the woods and made a fool of myself.'* He tried to tell himself that Isabel valued her position too highly to risk losing it. But he knew in his heart that she had changed, and that what Ransome's crude advances had not accomplished, Evan's charm and perverse love-making could. He longed for the summer's end when Evan would be gone again, and he

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yearned over his grandfather, who seemed shrunken lately, as if something inside of him had been drained away. For the first time Tremont appeared old, and Jonah was haunted, as he had been by Jennifer's illness, by the fear of losing another link with the past.

When the end of summer did come and Evan left, he kissed Isabel good-bye as casually as he did Lucile or Dorothy, and life to all appearances settled down at Riverridge without a ripple to show that what Jonah feared was true.

Two things that winter affected them all. Ward Perry, falling into a drunken slumber, set fire to his bed and burned himself to death, destroying the house and giving Virgie such a shock that she never fully recovered and died the next spring, having practically lost all memory of Jonah and her older friends.

And the automobile business increased by leaps and bounds. Cartoons showing the 'passing of the horse' (while the chagrined autoists attempted to find what was wrong with their temperamental vehicle) lost their sting; ladies rode in closed electric coupés which looked like telephone booths and barely accommodated their incredible, lavishly decorated hats, and Ransome Parks made so much money he was in a constant state of exuberance. He gave Lucile a car and persuaded Tremont to buy Isabel one. Lucile drove hers demurely along the country roads, taking young Ran for airings or going to make sedate calls, but Isabel used hers to make new friends, to take her to town to the theatre—a pleasure she had just discovered—and to take her to parties. Her beauty and money and the prestige of Riverridge attracted a number of young people from town, and Jonah and Tremont were reluctantly getting accustomed to the sound of feminine chatter when they came in in the afternoons, and to finding whist tables set up in the big room which Isabel had made particularly her own, the room which had been Jennifer's bedroom. As a protest against this invasion of his privacy, Tremont refused to drive in a car and made a ceremony of the currying, harnessing, feeding, and driving his own horses. Jonah, seeing

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the old ways threatened, was unhappy and wondered what Jennifer would have thought of the new.

So the weeks and the months and the seasons crept by, and suddenly Evan was through school and wrote that he would not be home that summer, for he was going to work for his father. Dorothy was eighteen, Lutie was going moon-eyed over a *matinée* idol and had his picture (cut from a current magazine) framed on her bureau; and little Ran was wearing his first, skin-tight pants and was nearly three years old.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN the years in which she had been mistress at Riverridge now, Isabel had made few changes in the house. The big room which had once been Jennifer's bedroom she had made peculiarly her own. It was here that she sat and read or sewed in the daytime or entertained her friends from town. And it was this room which she stripped to use for a small ballroom on the rare occasions when there was dancing. A year before, for instance, when Dorothy had formally 'come out,' John and Isabel had given her a dance and the big parlour and hall had been thrown together to make room for the guests. John had never cut the arch which Isabel had wanted which would make the hall and the end room into one big ballroom, and she was now glad that he hadn't. For it offered her a place in which to be with those of her new friends whom he did not particularly like, or of whom he disapproved. He had never forbidden her having them there, nor did he question her about her frequent trips to town, but it was obvious that he did not feel comfortable with them and there were a few he openly disliked, although he never discussed them with her. But Isabel, with her usual diplomacy, soon managed to arrange it so that those he did not care for were seldom at Riverridge. She did more entertaining in town, and if they did come out to the house when Tremont was home, she shut the

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door to his office and to the hall and he respected the desire for privacy she thus indicated.

The last year or two had taken something out of Tremont. He was not old, he told himself, sixty-nine was not old, but something had happened to his spirit with the passing of most of his contemporaries. Isabel was just as interested in the place as ever; in fact, her ideas were more progressive than his, he often said; but there was no one now who had the same associations with his past, no one who understood his courteous, old-fashioned point of view about many things—no one with whom to remember. He seemed to realize now that his future was necessarily not lengthy and the futility of further planning for someone else struck him with undeniable insistence. More and more he longed to sit and dream. Less and less he minded becoming an old man physically, and curtailing of his activities about the place.

The amenities about which he had been so concerned the Christmas after Jennifer's death had been preserved, and the ways of life at Riverridge and The Chimneys were pleasant and luxurious still. The long summer days and nights and the Christmas holidays found the family in and out of the house as of old—all except Evan, who was now engaged in business in the North and had been home only twice since Isabel's marriage. But something, some zest, some lively personal interest, had gone out of things for him. Jennifer was almost constantly in his thoughts.

This bleak November afternoon the wind blew about the house and the branches of the trees around the porch creaked and rattled. Up in her room Isabel thrust a chair-back under the door-handle and moved swiftly across the carpet to her bureau. From the bottom drawer she took a packet of letters tied with a lavender ribbon. Pulling a low armchair up to the hearth where a log fire roared, she sat down and untied the bundle. She lifted the letters off, one at a time, and read them slowly, leaning for-

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ward so that the fire reddened her face, and laid them on the top of the logs as she read. Occasionally she set one aside and did not burn it. As she read, she smiled or frowned or paused and looked for a long time out of the window with an expression of bitterness about her mouth and eyes.

When all but a dozen of the letters had been burned, she took those and re-read them carefully. She sat and stared at the fire between every few sentences and it would have been obvious to a spectator that she was reliving scenes which the words in the letters evoked. Sometimes she smiled, but not happily, and once tears ran down the face which had become drawn and tense with misery. Once she held the letters to her lips and kissed them with an abandon which seemed wholly out of character. Then she wrapped the ribbon around and around them, and for a time sat with the crumpled pages against her warm cheeks, dreamily staring.

The fire was getting low and Isabel laid one of the small logs which Fount cut for her on the embers. Then she sat back, pushing the hair up from her forehead with a gesture of utter weariness. The letters slid to the floor and lay against her foot. She leaned over presently and picked them up, running her thumb along the edges so that phrases from some of the pages flashed into sight. Suddenly she flung the whole pack into the fireplace and, jumping up, ran to the bed where she threw herself down and broke into a storm of weeping more violent and rending than any she had ever indulged in.

Afterwards, spent and exhausted and shivering with cold, she reached for the eiderdown quilt at the foot of the bed and drew it over her. Her head ached and her lids burned from the unaccustomed tears. She put one cold hand under her flushed cheek and, like a comfortless child, went to sleep.

At dusk when John came in from a walk he went straight upstairs and to their room. He was puzzled by the chair under the doorknob, alarmed when, after calling, he heard no response. He pushed the door open with little difficulty and went into the

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darkened room. Isabel lay curled under the eiderdown like a sleeping kitten. Still anxious, he crossed the room and stooped over her, listening to her even breathing. He smiled and went to the hearth, where only a few embers burned. The room was cold and cheerless and he decided to remake the fire before he wakened her. He got paper and wood from the materials with which Fount kept the house supplied and a match from a small box on the mantel. As the first flames flared, he saw the bundle of letters which had fallen into one corner of the deep hearth. Curious, he lifted it up on the point of the poker. The untied ribbon came loose and the pages floated over the new fire, catching and flaring up into little flowers of red and yellow before they crumbled into a grey ash. He saw then that the chimney floor had held a number of other little tufts of frail grey paper. On some of which the writing was still distinct. He saw that they were from Evan. For a moment he was only puzzled, and then he felt a cold premonition creep over him as he realized that she had never mentioned the letters to him, that she had obviously treasured them for months, and now, with her door barricaded, had burned them. There are only two kinds of letters which women burn—those with incriminating contents, and love-letters. Sitting there, watching the leaves curl and crumble, Tremont remembered the day he had told Jonah that he was going to marry Isabel. He remembered Jonah's white face and his own frightened question—'*You're not in love with her, are you, boy?*' Had Evan been? Had Jonah known then that Evan was? If so, why had Isabel not married him? The answer was obvious: Evan had been too young to ask her, had had no prospects, no money of his own. Tremont, staring as miserably into the fire as Isabel had a short time before, thought back and tried to remember if Evan had shown any jealousy, any unhappiness. He could remember nothing that would have indicated that there was anything between them. Evan had apparently always been carefree, and mischievously flirtatious with Isabel as he had with all girls. And it had been well over a year since Evan had

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been home! Surely, if there were anything between them he would have come last summer on his vacation; and when he didn't come, surely Isabel would have shown disappointment. He tried to recall those weeks, but he knew in his heart that, unsuspecting at the time, he would never have noticed if she had drooped a little. He would have taken any excuse, the weather, a slight *malaise*, anything she had given as the reason.

Just this morning, when he had opened a letter of his own from Evan and said across the breakfast table, 'Good! Evan is coming down for a couple of weeks' hunting!' she had merely smiled and said, 'Fine!' Surely she would have changed colour, trembled, looked guilty—no, not *guilty*. He mustn't let his thoughts run mad on this! After all, all she had done was to burn a few letters, some of which had been Evan's. She'd barricaded the door to take a nap—he should have had that old lock fixed weeks ago, he thought, clutching at the commonplace irrelevancy—the whole thing was a nightmare made up out of his own mind, out of the melancholy which seized him so often lately. Evan would be down in a day or so, and he would see then how normal everything was, how ridiculous his fears and suspicions.

He rose, feeling an extra tenderness for her because of the guilt of his own baseless thoughts, and went and stooped over her, waking her with a kiss. How warm she was and soft! Her skin like a baby's faintly damp with the warmth of the eiderdown, her hair curling about her flushed cheeks.

She woke slowly and lay staring at him, a look of bewilderment in her eyes. Suddenly she sat up and looked at the fireplace. It was only natural that she should look there first, he told himself; it was opposite the foot of the bed and the roaring blaze in the dark room made a definite point of interest.

Isabel jumped up, throwing the quilt back, and made a show of indifference, yawning and stretching mightily. She staggered past the hearth, glancing quickly to see that all signs of the letters were gone, noticed that there were only fragments of ashes. Over

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her shoulder she saw that Tremont was lighting the lamp. His face bent above the match's flare looked sad.

'He's good!' she thought with a rush of remorse. *'He wouldn't have read the letters if they'd been left open on the bureau!'*

She laughed with sheer relief, and said: 'I must have slept hours! How did you get in? I thought I was barricaded. You must fix that lock, John. You know I don't like to sleep with the door open.'

He looked up with sudden happiness in his face, thinking, *'That's true—she always shuts the door when she lies down. And nearly always locks it. The letters were nothing—just some feminine tidying-up—nothing.'*

'I'll do it first thing in the morning. Here—you'll want a lamp by the bureau—it's almost time for supper. I think I'll have electricity put in right after Christmas. The lines are coming out pretty far on the pike, now. Just one more Christmas with candles and then we'll have electric lights—what do you say?'

'John! That would be marvellous! Just think—no more smell of oil—no more fumbling for matches—they turn on instantly—why, everybody has them in town now, even gas is going out; the Gibsons have the most wonderful chandelier—a dozen light globes all frosted white and made like bunches of grapes—it's beautiful.'

'I can see I've started something,' said John, grinning wryly, and Isabel, slipping out of her rumpled dress, laughed at him above the edge of the skirt as she pulled it over her untidy hair.

He came and kissed her bare shoulder, and she, suddenly sorry for him, lifted her pouted lips and kissed him on the mouth.

'He's old!' she thought, her unhappiness returning more strongly than ever, *'but he's good—but he's old!'*

And that night, lying awake beside her, Tremont thought, *'After all she never agreed to love me. I don't "love" her—we simply live together peaceably and comfortably. Why should I expect her to live without love?'* and again he was sad and went to sleep, remembering Jennifer.

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The day before Evan came, it snowed all day and far into the night. The next day the white glare of it shone through the windows of Riverridge. There was no escape from that weird light; not even the yellow flames of the firelight could dispel it until nightfall, and then the moon came up, as pale and insubstantial as a communion wafer and the blue-white light spread over everything again.

All that morning the glare had made Isabel nervous. It filled her with the same sort of excitement that she felt in very bright moonlight. She was frantically busy and torn between tears and sudden bursts of gaiety. Jonah, watching her under slanted lashes, wondered. Evan had not been home for a long time; and not for a long time, almost never, had Isabel been so animated. He was depressed, fearing what the two of them might do to his grandfather.

Isabel, coming into Jennifer's old room, found him curled up on the window-seat she had had built. She said, looking out on the white fields to the river: 'It will be full moon tonight. I've had Pompey get out the sleigh—he says the snow is more than deep enough to use it. We'll all ride in to meet him—in the moonlight!'

The words almost sang, and the fact that she had said 'him,' instead of using Evan's name, showed that her mind had been on him all morning. Jonah felt the old prick of jealousy of the cousin who could so easily create a sense of excitement and ardour in others.

The train was due at ten. At the last moment Tremont decided not to go, pleading a lame shoulder.

'I'll toast here by the fire and let you young people brave that cold,' he said, and Jonah's heart ached for him. It was the first time he had spoken of the differences in their ages, and Jonah felt that it was an unconscious expression of the knowledge he had that Isabel and Evan cared for each other, and that their love was more suitable. His grandfather standing by the hearth, looking into the fire's blaze, seemed beautiful to him, and Jonah

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had to resist the impulse to go back and put his arms around him. Only the knowledge that such a gesture could not be explained in words and that it might add to Tremont's obvious dejection restrained him.

Turning, he hurried down the steps and looked into Isabel's upturned face. It was clear-cut like a cameo in the bright moonlight. She was smiling, and he thought, as he had once before, of the changes which had taken place since first she had stood there smiling that bright May afternoon.

She put one hand in his and he helped her into the sleigh, tucking the robe closely about her knees. Then he limped around to the other side and got in. Under the robe their knees touched. The fragrance of her perfume came to him over the cold, clean breath of the night. She settled against him comfortably, holding her muff against her cheek to shut out the wind as Jonah picked up the reins and slapped them against the mare's back. Through the bare branches of the trees the stars looked pale and distant in the blue-black sky, as if the light of the moon and the snow outshone them. The sleigh moved smoothly over the road with a squeaky sound. Jonah loved the sensation of the cold on his face and of the warmth and fragrance of Isabel beside him. He was suddenly exhilarated, as though they were lovers, here in the magic moonlight.

She had been silent all the way, her muff held before her, her head leaning on his shoulder. He knew that she was thinking of Evan and he racked his mind for some way to divert her, but he could think of none. There seemed to be some spell on this bitter white night which kept them both silent until Jonah said, 'I wonder how you would describe moonlight—how you'd write this scene, for instance, the fields, the houses 'way back in the fields with their yellow lights and sky so far over us tonight? What colour would you say moonlight was?'

'The colour of moonlight,' said Isabel at once, as though she had been alert all along. 'You wouldn't have to describe it—everybody's seen moonlight—everybody who's big enough to

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read, anyway. You would just have to say, "There was snow on the ground that night—and it was bright moonlight." "

Jonah laughed and thought, '*That night—this night—is significant to her because Evan is coming home.*' And often afterwards he wondered how many times she must have remembered those words—'*There was snow on the ground that night—and it was bright moonlight.*'

About a block from the railway station, the snow had turned to slush and they had to get out and leave the sleigh. Jonah tethered the horse to a hitching-post in front of an old store building and they picked their way across the wet paving. The train came in just as they stepped upon the platform, and Jonah, looking at Isabel, saw that she was extremely pale, and that her eyes, wide and very dark, were fastened on the train as though she would see through it to the place where Evan stood. There was something in that hungry gaze that moved him to pity.

The train snorted to a stop and one or two people got off, a man and a woman, carrying two small children; a fat boy wrapped to the eyelids in mufflers; and an old lady. Isabel's hand on Jonah's arm bit into him through the thickness of his overcoat. She leaned forward and suddenly her face broke into an expression of delighted relief.

'There he is—*there!* Evan!' She pulled Jonah along, and as he lagged, dragged back by his lame foot, she let go of him and ran forward. Jonah saw her throw her arms about him and saw Evan catch her to him, his face, leaner now and a little strange, broken into wrinkles of laughter. He almost swung her from her feet as, waving the muff over his shoulder, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

'Nothing furtive or romantic in that,' thought Jonah with relief as he came up and took Evan's hand and pumped it.

But on the way home Jonah was silent. He drove and was miserably conscious of Evan's arm around Isabel, of her shoulder fitted snugly into Evan's armpit, of the happiness in her voice as she chattered. His thoughts went back to his grandfather alone

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there by the fire, and the sympathy he had felt for the two beside him oozed away and evaporated as the vapour of his breath vanished in the cold darkness. He let them out at the front steps and drove the sleigh around to the barn. He did not call Fount to unhitch, but, as Tremont had done when he had first discovered that Isabel's presence disturbed him, he took a long time to put away the sleigh and to rub down the mare. As he painfully climbed the frosty back steps, he cursed himself for a fool. If for no other reason than that he should have seen Tremont's expression when he met them, he should have gone in with them. Everything of this sort was essential to a writer, he told himself. A writer couldn't afford to be a coward. He had to watch people suffer just as a surgeon did, in order to know about them. Even if those people were dear to him. If his grandfather thought that Isabel loved Evan, he would surely have shown it now.

In the hall Jonah stood blinking, his hair ruffled as he pulled off his fur cap, his eyes looking dark and bewildered in the bright light.

'Right after Christmas,' Isabel was saying, 'we're going to have electricity put in.' She was standing before the fire in the library, her hat in her hand, still in her long fur coat. A nimbus from the firelight shone through the edges of the fur; her face lifted to Evan's was in the shadow, but even the outline of her cheek, the tilt of her head and throat, were vibrant with her delight in him. Evan smiled down at her, lean and graceful, one hand in his pocket, one arm along the mantel.

Tremont came from the dining-room carrying sherry and glasses on a tray.

'A toast for the prodigal,' he said, waving the bottle stiffly at Jonah, who smiled then and began to take off his coat.

In the library, Evan was helping Isabel out of hers. He flung it over a chair and she sat down with the coat back of her, its dark fur making a frame for her pale head.

They drank to Evan's return and to successful hunting. There in the firelight in the beautiful old room they were four civilized

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people. Jonah had a sudden sensation of unhappiness, a childish desire to cling to this moment, to pretend that it could never be broken, that they could stay there like people enchanted; because if once the brittle magic of its perfection were broken, terrible, tragic things might happen to them all.

But when they left the room, it was with the utmost placidity, with Evan yawning and Tremont talking of the dogs they would use, the friends who would go on the hunt.

'I hope this dratted shoulder of mine is better in the morning,' he said as he went up the stairs behind Isabel. 'I got Fount to work on it tonight, but it's still stiff.'

At the head of the stairs Isabel looked back and her eyes met Evan's. She put the fur sleeve of the coat against her cheek in a caressing gesture. Jonah wondered if she remembered Evan's singing,

'You want to marry a young man with healthy, rosy cheeks,
For if an old man gets the rheumatiz, he stays in bed for weeks.'

And he was stirred again with pity for his grandfather.

Isabel and Jonah stood on the porch in the tingling air next morning and watched the hunters ride away. It was a scene which for Jonah had both the immediate beauty of colour and action and a beauty born of a long-familiar ceremony. To Isabel it was an evidence of a mania she could not understand, the very language and symbols of which bored her; but she was almost painfully aware of Evan, handsome and debonair in his hunting-clothes astride one of his beloved Star's own colts, his teeth flashing in a smile that was impersonal and gay, his ruddy head glowing in the winter sun. Just as the party formed to go, a girl on a slim black horse rode up the driveway, waving and calling, 'Wait for me! Wait for me!'

Isabel recognized her as the daughter of Ben Little, one of the men in the group. She had seen her once at a formal tea, but had never met her. She was a slender girl of about her own age with dark hair, a piquant pointed face, and almost orientally slanted

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eyes of the clearest green. Her skin was that exquisite white tinged with a natural red that had a fruity look. Isabel had thought when she first saw her that she was the most beautiful creature she had ever laid eyes on. Now, as she joined the group, breathless and with her colour high with cold, Evan rode forward and grasped the reins of the girl's mount. He wore a look of glad surprise that went through Isabel's heart like a thin blade.

She had never gone hunting and she had refused to go this time, although at least one whole day of Evan's brief visit would be absorbed by it. She was afraid of horses, and the outdoors had little appeal to her; but had she known that other women were going this time, she might have hidden her dislike of all the ceremony of hunting and gone too.

She wished now that she had. The tiring day in the saddle, the boresome talk of dogs and of previous hunts, the noise, the long waiting, the shooting which was horrible to her—nothing would have been as hard to bear as the bitter knowledge that all day long in the beautiful snow-laden woods Evan and that gorgeous creature were going to be together. Isabel turned back into the house saying, 'Brr! It's too cold to watch any longer,' and hoped Jonah did not hear the stiffness of her suddenly aching throat in the words or see the misery in her eyes. He, too, turned and went in. He had not missed Isabel's quick, despairing glance at Peggy Little, and he had realized, with the intuition that his own years of illness and unhappiness had given him, that she was suffering.

The house seemed empty as they closed the door on the last muted hoofbeats and the faint baying of the dogs, empty and meaningless.

'I think I'll go to town,' said Isabel. 'I have some shopping to do—and I want to get some flowers for the table.'

'I'll go with you, if I may,' said Jonah. 'I need some books from the library. Going soon?'

'As soon as I speak to Delia,' said Isabel, hurrying into the dining-room. She was so pale that he watched her anxiously and

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stood for a long time in deep thought in the hall before he went upstairs to get his overcoat.

On the way to town they arranged to meet for lunch and to go to a *matinée*. They came home laden with red roses, a new dress for Isabel, the French rolls that Tremont liked, and a bottle of Evan's favourite whiskey. So that it was Evan and Tremont who waited for them, rather than they who had a long, lonely day indoors. Jonah felt that it had been a day well spent, and Isabel had been so gay and had seemed so thoroughly to enjoy herself that he had begun to wonder if he had not fallen into the habit of romancing about people and was not losing the gift he had sworn to cherish, that of seeing life with clear eyes.

But the next afternoon, when the hunters had gone out again, this time on a purely male expedition, Isabel sat with Jonah in her favourite room and stared at the fire. He read on the cushioned window-seat and the room was steeped in a warm, slumberous silence broken only by the sputtering of the coals.

Suddenly they heard quick steps, outside. The door to the back porch was flung open and there stood Evan, bareheaded, vibrant, and with that dare-devil air that he had when he was in particularly high spirits. Behind him lay the brightness of the snowy fields.

Isabel sprang up and stood by her chair, one hand on the back of it, her lips parted, and in her eyes a look of joy that no one could mistake. Jonah was as embarrassed at seeing it as if, when she stood, her clothes had fallen from her and left her naked between the two of them.

'Crescent cast a shoe,' said Evan, 'I had to bring her in.' He came in laughing, throwing his riding-gloves on a table and caught Isabel about the waist. He began to dance, forcing her to follow his steps, holding her close and singing,

'Down in the valley,
The valley so low,
Hang your head over,
Hear the wind blow.'

The tune of the old song was slow, but their feet made a rapid

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patter on the rug and the polished floor. Isabel, leaning away from him, looked up into his face laughing. Her cheeks were flushed with the rare and delicate pink which in her meant deep excitement and Evan bent over her in an exaggerated attitude of devotion. Jonah did not know whether or not Evan had seen him, and wished himself anywhere else on earth.

'If you don't love me, [sang Evan]
Love whom you please.
Throw your arms 'round me,
Give me heart's ease.

'Throw your arms round me
Before it's too late,
Throw your arms round me,
Feel my heart break.'

He drew her close. Isabel stopped smiling and leaned against him. She closed her eyes, but a look of hunger stayed in her face like a shadow. Evan laid his cheek on the top of her hair and they became lost in a dream of their own. He dropped his voice and crooned, barely murmuring the words as they swayed:

'Will you be mine, dear?
Will you be mine?
Answer my question,
Will you be mine?'

Jonah felt his whole body stiffen with shame for them. He wanted to get up and limp from the room, but he felt that his presence there was all that kept them from open passion. He stirred restlessly on the window-seat and rattled the pages of the book, feeling like an awkward and unwanted child.

Suddenly Isabel opened her eyes and pushed Evan from her. 'Get along with you!' she cried. 'What would John think of me—listening to you sing love-songs!'

It was so unlike her to precipitate a situation that Jonah knew she must be upset. He brought his foot down on the floor with a bang, hoping to divert Evan's interest to himself. But Evan only stood where she had left him, in the middle of the floor, his face warm, his hair pushed up into a soft wave where it had rested

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against her head. For a long moment he stared at her vaguely, and then, grinning, turned and walked into the hall.

They heard him singing like a drunken man,

'If you don't love me,
Love whom you please!'

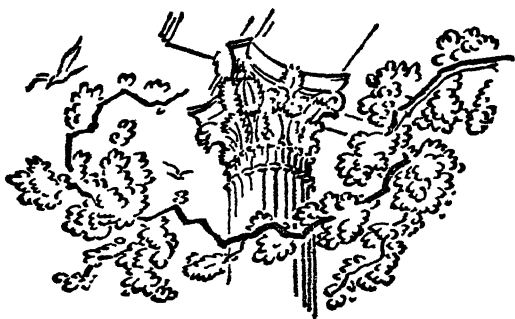
He ran up the stairs——

'Roses love sunshine,
Violets love dew,
Angels in heaven——'

He closed the door and the muffled familiar last line, '*Knows I love you!*' seemed to echo in their ears like thunder.

Isabel shot a quick glance at Jonah, who was staring blindly at the page before him. He felt in every nerve the guilty heaviness of her movements as she went and stood before the fire, and then, bending, poked it unnecessarily.

When he could bear to take his eyes from the book and look at her, he was amazed to see tears sliding unheeded down her face.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE next afternoon Isabel was sitting in her downstairs room mending. Evan was in his room assembling some hunting paraphernalia, Jonah had gone to town, and John Tremont lay reading on his old office couch with a shawl over his legs. He had a small stove going and occasionally would reach over and put in a lump of coal or adjust a draught. These little sounds were all that broke the snowbound stillness of the place. The silence seemed as tangible as the snow itself, and Isabel, looking out across the white fields, sighed with boredom.

When she heard a disturbance in the front drive, she rose eagerly, hoping that some of her town friends had come to break the tedium of the afternoon, or that Jonah, with news of happenings beyond the bounds of Riverridge, had returned.

A buggy was pulled up close to the porch, and a Negro coachman, wrapped to his ears in an ancient Astrakhan coat, was helping a girl out on to the icy piazza steps. She wore a moss-green skirt and a fawn-coloured fur jacket with hat to match. Her head was bent as she struggled to keep her footing on the slippery wood. The coachman handed her up with care, and at the top of the steps she raised her head and looked directly at Isabel. It was the girl who had ridden to the hunt with Evan. Under the fur cap and the dark brush of her hair, her slanting green eyes were alight with laughter. The pointed face was as rich in colour-

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ing as a rose, and there was assurance in the lift and verve of the slender body, even when she teetered on the treacherous porch. She walked carefully on the ice to the door and clung to the knob. Isabel, coming across the hall and opening the door, found her hanging there like some bright-coloured moth.

'Hello,' said the girl, 'I'm Peggy Little.' She looked up expectantly, but antipathy made Isabel stiff and unresponsive.

'Come in,' she said inimically. She remembered this girl laughing up into Evan's face on the morning of the hunt, and Evan's swift, delighted response. 'Come in—and let your driver go to the kitchen—Fount is in the pantry and will see to him.'

The man bowed his thanks and stepped gingerly off the porch.

'Come on in,' said Isabel again. She felt annoyance creep up within her like a flame at seeing this beautiful gay girl again while Evan was here, at her own awkwardness and at her disappointment that this had not been one of her personal friends who would prove diverting.

She turned and led the way back into her sitting-room, crossing the room swiftly and shutting Tremont's door. The girl stood in the centre of the room and looked through the windows at the fields spreading long and white to the dark river below.

'How lovely!' she said. 'It's like a painting, isn't it?'

Isabel turned to look at the fields as if she had never noticed them before. She said nothing. She was thinking that she looked frowzy and mature in her heavily embroidered shirtwaist and black shirt with its curving gores—like an old married woman. She made the gesture she used on the rare occasions on which she was upset. She smoothed her hair with her flattened hand and said tonelessly, 'Sit down—do.'

'Oh, I can't, really,' said Peggy Little, seating herself and unbuttoning one small kid glove, 'I just came on an errand. I lost a riding-glove the other day—the day of the hunt, you know—and I thought I might have dropped it in the yard here.'

As she talked, her eyes moved constantly to the hall as if she

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hoped to see someone there, and Isabel, feeling her heart turn to lead and sink heavily, thought, *'She lost no glove! This is just an excuse to see Evan again!'*

'I'm afraid not,' she said. 'I'll ask Fount if you will wait.' And she rose and left the room feeling that she must get away from that lovely, mobile face, those green eyes and the scent which stirred in the warm air of the room every time the girl shifted that tall body. In the hall, she stood still a moment to get herself under control. She went into the pantry and spoke to Fount, who was conversing hilariously with the Astrakhan-coated driver.

'Miss Little lost a glove at the hunt the other day. Have you seen it, Fount?'

'No, ma'am, I'd a-brung it straight to you, effen I had,' he said.

Isabel went back to the room and found the girl standing in front of the fire.

'What a simply beautiful old house!' she said the minute Isabel came into the room. 'Could I—would you mind if I saw it—the downstairs, of course. I used to come here when I was a very small child—when Evan and Jonah and Dorothy were tiny. And then I went away to school—my mother died—I so seldom came home. I wanted to see if it had changed.'

'It's just like all the other houses around here, isn't it?' asked Isabel ungraciously. 'But of course you may see it, if you wish.'

She made a gesture with her hand about the room. 'This was Mrs. Tremont's room—after she died we made it into a sort of family sitting-room.'

She went into the hall—'The hall, the dining-room, the library are the same as always—I suppose. I've only been here a few years myself. The little "gilt" parlour—it must have been here when you were a child. And this room——'

She stood just inside the door of the big parlour and looked at it, suddenly remembering that first day she had seen it herself, the yellow roses, the dark mirror, the gallant old lady in black serving tea. And she remembered seeing Evan that afternoon

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for the first time, too, his coppery head catching the sun's last rays, his uplifted face—his flashing smile. Such desire for him surged through her that she was physically weak and felt the blood leave her face and throttle her heart. She leaned against the door-frame for support and wished with all her being that this chattering fool would go—go before she was ill, before Evan came in and, with his exasperating attentions, prolonged the visit.

The girl swept past her into the room.

'That old piano!' she exclaimed, running her hands over the keys. 'You'd never believe it could last so well if you knew the times Evan and I have played chopsticks on it!'

She sat down, tearing off her gloves and played the childish tune, while Isabel thought bitterly, *'Evan this! Evan that! She's got to say his name in every other breath! Why doesn't she stop playing that silly thing! Trying to make him hear! Why doesn't she just stand at the foot of the stairs and shout his name!'*

Just then the girl broke into a lively waltz, humming as she played. Her body swayed to the tune as she smiled dreamily. She seemed to have forgotten that Isabel was near her. She played easily, with a rich, natural tone, and the sound went through the house in waves of gaiety.

As she stopped, she swung around on the stool and clapped her hands childishly, laughing at Evan, who had come up behind Isabel so quietly that she gave a nervous start when he joined in the applause.

'Bravo! Bravo!' he cried, and came into the room, taking the girl's hands in his, pulling her up from the stool. 'What are you doing here?—Oh, hello, Isabel—didn't see you inside the door there. It's grand to have you two girls together, but, Peg, I didn't know you knew my grandmother.'

The girl drew away from him, looking into his face for the explanation of this joke.

'Your *what?*' she exclaimed, dimpling.

'My grandmother,' said Evan, with an air of such innocence that Isabel could have slapped him. 'You mean that you

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haven't been introduced, that you didn't know this was Mrs. Tremont?'

The laughter left the girl's face instantly. She turned and stared at Isabel with an expression at once incredulous and indignant, as if she thought Isabel had deliberately withheld her identity.

'But she told me—I knew that—why, she said—Mrs. Tremont is dead! I remember your grandmother. She was an old lady. Your grandfather was an old man——'

Isabel was furious, but suddenly she felt actually old, old and matronly and awkward and miserable, because Evan had called her his grandmother before this vivid young creature, as though he wanted the girl to know that Isabel was married and to all purposes mature, a woman in whom he could have no possible interest. She dropped her long lids suddenly.

'You mean you—you married Mr. Tremont!' the girl exclaimed.

'Over three years ago,' said Isabel dryly.

'But—I wouldn't have had any way of knowing.' Peggy was the awkward one now, with Evan between them grinning like the devil he was. 'I've only been home a few days and nobody told me. I guess by now nobody would think to mention it—that Mr. Tremont had married again, I mean. I thought you——'

'Were the housekeeper,' said Isabel, as though she meant to help out a stumbling child. 'Well, I am. The housekeeper and Evan's grandmother.' (*'How, if she has only been here a few days after all these years, did Evan remember her so well the day of the hunt? They met like old friends—like lovers!'*) thought Isabel, tormented by questions she could not bring herself to ask.)

As if she herself sensed this discrepancy, Peggy said, 'I used to see Evan in New York—where I was in school and where I lived with my aunt for a while. He never told me—about you, I mean.'

'I don't suppose he thought it would interest you,' said Isabel,

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wondering how she could stand still another minute without screaming. 'If you will excuse me now'—she added, making the suggestion of a bow—'I have my *housekeeping* to attend to. Since you and Evan are such old friends, I'm sure he will be glad to see you to your carriage!'

She longed to go to her room and cry her heart out, but she knew that if she went upstairs Evan would know exactly what she meant to do. So she walked back into her sitting-room and picked up the skirt she had been mending. She stared at it blindly with misery such as she had never known, while thoughts, like persistent, dark bats, beat at her brain and tore at her heart; '*I used to see Evan in New York.*' All the time he had been writing to her, he had been seeing this girl, making her fall in love with him, no doubt. '*He never told me about you.*' ('*I can imagine not!*') thought Isabel angrily, '*any more than he told me about you!*')'

Resentment against Evan, who must have adulation wherever he could find it, no matter how it hurt the adorer, flared in Isabel's heart—resentment and the fear that she would lose him to this unattached and gorgeous creature who was obviously in love with him, obviously willing to flaunt convention to seek him out, to pursue him.

Isabel heard their voices rise as do the voices of people parting. She heard Evan shout an order to the driver in the pantry, heard the door open and their voices in the outdoor air for a moment before it closed. Then she rose and dropping her sewing ran out into the hall and up the stairs.

In her room she leaned against the mantel and sobbed, her head in her arms. When she was exhausted, she unhooked the skirt and let it fall about her feet. Then she unbuttoned the fancily embroidered shirtwaist. She took it off slowly, her eyes fixed on nothing with a blank hard stare. She folded it carefully again and again, until it was a neat, small bundle, and suddenly, realizing what she had been doing, she flung it from her as though it were repulsive. It fell into the fire, unfolded pathetically and

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then caught, falling into grey ashes in the flower-shapes of the embroidery's pattern.

Evan prolonged his visit another week, and then it was so close to Christmas and the holidays that he announced that he would stay on. The day after Peggy Little had come to the house, he had found Isabel alone in the dining-room sorting some silver for Fount to clean. Evan had not been oblivious to Isabel's mood since he had teased her in front of Peggy, and the look of weariness in her eyes now made him relent. He came and stood beside her, taking her hands as she fumbled for knives and forks, every nerve in her body aware of his nearness.

'Mad at me?' he asked, forcing her to turn towards him. 'Don't you like me any more?'

Under her lowered lids the tears burned suddenly. She hated herself for the emotion he stirred in her—she who had taken a pride in her level-headed self-control.

'Please go away!' she said tightly, 'I'm busy.'

'But you don't want me to go away—do you?' he asked, lowering his voice.

'I'm busy,' she repeated, 'I have "the housekeeping" to do!'

She pulled away from him and went into the pantry, throwing the silver on the table.

'Be sure not to put the handles of these knives into hot water,' she said to Fount in a voice choked with misery which she tried to conceal.

She came back into the dining-room where Evan was peeling an apple. He cut the peeling around and around carefully and flung it over his shoulder. It made a capital *I* like the writing of a small child on the rug. Isabel stared down at it.

'See—it's fate!' said Evan, grinning and biting into the apple.

She went past him, but he stopped her with a long, sinewy arm.

'You're jealous,' he said, and she flashed him an angry look. 'Peggy's just a kid. Her father's going to make some investments. It's my business to get them for our firm. I'm naturally

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going to be nice to his daughter. But——' He stopped and pulled her into a corner of the room out of sight of the half-open pantry door. He set the apple on the sideboard and drew her to him. At the feel of his arms around her, all the resistance went out of her as easily as she could have squeezed the pulp from a grape. Desire seemed to flow into her veins. She let herself lean against him savouring the delicious feeling of their bodies' contact, trying not to be aware that any other would serve Evan as well to flirt with. He kissed her slowly and the thrill of it went through her like a sweet pain. Her lips lingered against his and the fragrance of the apple was between them.

Fount dropped a fork and they sprang apart, but once more, before she ran upstairs with her heart lightened, she pulled him to her and kissed him with a passion she had never shown anyone in her short, carefully arranged life.

That night she wore the new frock she had bought in town the day of the hunt. It was powder-blue, and across her cheekbones she had brushed a feather of rouge so that her eyes sparkled and she seemed more beautiful than ever. They drank a toast to the new dress and after dinner Ran came over and they had music. Tremont seemed much better and the old house took on a new life and colour.

During the week, Jonah had brought tickets for a ballet and when Dorothy came home he suggested that he and Isabel and Tremont go. But Tremont said he cared little for seeing 'toe dancing,' so Evan escorted Isabel. Jonah was uncomfortable, feeling that anything which threw the two together was a connivance against his grandfather, but there was nothing he could do which would not be obvious, and surely the four of them together would be perfectly proper.

It was a brilliant night, with snow half off the fields and the smell of its wetness in the air. They took Ran's new car, and Evan drove. Dorothy was in a high feather and on the way taught them the new songs she had learned at school, 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' and 'The Oceana Roll.'

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She told them of the new dances with names that were astounding to Isabel—'The Turkey Trot,' 'The Bunny Hug,' 'The Grizzly Bear,' and 'The Jelly Bean.' Isabel, listening to her chatter, was regretful that she had cut off her own carefree girlhood so abruptly.

The ballet was beautiful, and Jonah was lost most of the time in a dream. But Evan and Dorothy were in too high spirits to be interested in 'culture.' He kept her in giggles with ludicrous explanations of the dancers' posturings. Isabel, enjoying both the beauty of the dancers and the pleasure of being in a crowd, threw off her dejection and laughed with Dorothy at Evan's nonsense.

Afterwards they went to Huyler's and sat talking over hot chocolates, and Jonah, watching Isabel, thought pityingly that this was the sort of thing she should be doing naturally instead of bearing the responsibility of a great house and a tired old man. On the way home he shut his eyes to the fact that Isabel's head rested on Evan's shoulder and that they were, for all the world to see, two people apparently in love. He let Dorothy chatter on, making the necessary responses and pondering in his anxious heart the outcome of this unhappy situation.

They drove leisurely and took Dorothy home first so that it was very late when they arrived at Riverridge. It was Isabel who noticed the dark huddled figure at the foot of the stair. She ran forward, throwing her muff away and cried, stooping over him, 'John! John! Oh, he's killed himself!'

Tremont moved stiffly.

'Nothing so—dramatic, my dear,' he said with an effort. 'I slipped and did something to my left leg as I was going upstairs. I couldn't move, couldn't make Fount hear me from this distance, so I just made myself as comfortable as possible. It must have been pretty comfortable—I dozed off.'

But his face was colourless and he winced when Evan and Jonah tried to move him to a sitting position.

'I'll phone—Doctor Betts!' cried Isabel breathlessly and ran into the back hall.

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'Maybe we'd better not move him,' said Jonah, who cringed at the idea of hurting his grandfather.

'But it's cold on this floor,' objected Evan, stopping to take off his heavy coat and laying it over Tremont. 'It's not his back that's hurt. If just one of us could lift him we shouldn't have to pull on him and we could get him on to his lounge in the office.'

'Get Fount,' said Tremont with his eyes closed, and Jonah fled. In a moment he was back. Evan was holding a glass of brandy to Tremont's lips and Isabel had fetched a pillow from her sitting-room.

'The office is cold,' said Jonah. 'I'll go lay a fire and get the chill off while Fount's getting something on.'

He went into the dark little room and lighted the lamp. His throat closed as he thought of the times during his life in which he had seen that thin figure bent over the desk here or stretched on the lounge. He lifted the lids from the stove, found the shaker, and began to clean out the grate. His heart was sore with the memory of that long, gay evening. He wondered if while they had sat over their chocolates, or while they had lingered at Dorothy's laughing and whispering in the cold secrecy of the night, the old man had lain there in pain and fright, longing for someone to come. The words, '*I couldn't make Fount hear me,*' came back to Jonah and he groaned with remorse and pity.

Presently he heard a shuffling and a murmur of voices, and looked up to Fount staggering through the sitting-room with Tremont limp in his arms.

'He fainted when we picked him up,' said Evan anxiously. 'When did Betts say he'd be here?' he asked, turning to Isabel as Jonah helped Fount straighten the long figure on the couch.

'His leg doesn't seem to be broken,' said Jonah, feeling it carefully. 'I'm more afraid of pneumonia—no telling how long he lay there.'

'Po' Mistuh John,' said Fount, and Isabel moved forward to put the big shawl over him.

They sat about in heavy silence while the fire crackled and the

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little stove began to glow. Jonah cut down the draught, and Evan, yawning, ran his hands through his hair.

Isabel rose and said: 'Fount, come into the pantry and make some coffee: the doctor will be cold. We may be up a long time. I'll get you some of those new crackers and you might slice a little ham to go with them.'

The doctor came. Evan and Jonah stayed while Isabel went into the sitting-room and paced the floor. She could hear them murmuring; once she heard a sharp cry from Tremont and she clasped her hands and shook them. After what seemed an interminable time and three men came out.

The doctor shut the door and came to her. She was in a fever of impatience. Why did he have to be so mysterious? Why didn't he tell her how grave the situation was?

He looked tired, puffy with lack of sleep, but not too downcast.

'He seems to have strained a ligament,' he said to Isabel. 'He must have twisted his body as he fell. It's a living wonder he didn't break a hip—not much padding there. But he's in wonderful shape. I've given him a sedative and he'll probably sleep till morning.'

'We'll stay down here, anyway,' said Isabel, and the doctor smiled.

Fount came in with coffee which the doctor accepted gratefully. They sat about drinking and nibbling at the crackers and ham.

'I'm worried about pneumonia,' said Jonah. 'We don't know how long he lay there.'

'No sign of it,' said the doctor, 'I examined him thoroughly. Of course, he should be watched carefully, but there's no bone break, no reason why he shouldn't be up and about in a day or so. He's really remarkable, heart, lungs—everything ticking like a watch. He's good for another twenty years—and he'll be active, too, I'd say.' He tipped his cup.

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Jonah looked at Isabel and caught her glance at Evan. It was one of furtive misery.

The three of them sat up that night with Tremont. They built the fire high in Isabel's sitting-room and sat talking in undertones until the white dawn crept in at the windows.

It was a night in which Isabel felt that she aged a dozen years. She kept going over and over in her mind the careless caresses Evan had given her, trying to convince herself that he cared as she did; that he was not flirting with her as he claimed to be with Peggy Little, as he always had with any pretty girl who came along. She remembered with miserable hunger his kisses a few days before, after Peggy's visit, and her own rapture in his arms.

Against this was the stark fact of her marriage to Tremont and the doctor's cheerful verdict, '*He's good for another twenty years!*'

Twenty years! She looked at Evan's bright head, at his face, drawn and pale now and touched with shadows in the firelight—twenty years from now he'd be well over forty. It seemed an incredible age. He'd never wait for her that long, not even if she could make him love her. She thought of Tremont with impatience. Any other man would have killed himself—at his age and falling downstairs. But he'd be up again in a few days—good for another twenty years!

She was shocked at her own hardness, but told herself stubbornly that it was nonsense to pretend that she wouldn't have welcomed release from her present situation. If Tremont could have died, quickly and almost painlessly—if he could have died and left her well-off, perhaps even owner of Riverridge, with Evan here and half in love with her now—there would be no limit to what she might not do. For a moment or two she let herself dream of these possibilities. She saw herself married to Evan, Evan converted to her pride in the place, the two of them always together in the setting she valued most.

Suddenly from somewhere she had a vision of the scene in the garden the night before her marriage when she had told Ransome

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Parks that she knew what she was getting into and that she would do *anything* for security. But she had not known then how love could take you and twist your heart and turn your bones to water while silver blades of a sweet, mysterious pain ran up your spine and down your limbs and seemed to make you faint as with an illness. She had never been stirred then by kisses searching for a response in her own soft lips, or by the caresses of hands which were both eager and practiced in the arts of love.

'O God!' she thought, with tremulous despair and felt sudden hot tears against her lids. If only she could know what Evan felt! If only he would take her into his arms and say, '*Come away with me—we'll just go and never come back—never see any of them again. There'll only be you and me and our love—ever.*' If only she could be *sure* of him!

But the hard practicality which was her strongest characteristic told her that this would never happen. Evan would never breast the scandal and the discomfort of making such a drastic move, not as long as his grandfather lived. And John Tremont was going to live—the doctor had just said so. He'd get well and the years would drag on and she would never have Evan and Evan's passionate love, only the things she had bargained for.

Evan had dozed, and seeing his face relaxed and pale she thought, '*Why can't I stop this? Why don't I realize I'm just torturing myself? He's never cared for anybody except to amuse himself. If I got him to love me, he'd never have the courage to take me. And I'd have lost everything I've worked for—and have only Evan.*'

She resolutely set herself to think of what she had. In her mind she went over the house, room by room, savouring the comfort and the size of it, her sense of possession growing slowly, as a wilted plant revives in the evening's cool. She thought of the land, the spreading fields, the barns and the gardens, the sweeping lawn, the impressive approach to the house—to Riverridge of which she was mistress. She brought out little memories of the homage and envy of her acquaintances to bolster up her weakened pride. She recalled the old feeling of insecurity she had known in

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her childhood and the shoddiness of genteel poverty which she and her parents had endured.

Gradually her passion and unhappiness receded. In the back of her mind, like a small worm in a piece of fruit, there lurked the thought that for a long time yet she could have Evan's caresses, his light and unsatisfying love-making and still retain her pride and her position as mistress of Riverridge. She would never be sure of Evan's love because she could never decently command it. She would have to be satisfied with the crumbs of his affection. But if she could have those and still have her possessions——

Evan stirred, opened his eyes, and blinked in the grey-white dawn.

'Let's get Fount to come in and sit with Grandad,' he said, yawning, 'if he's still under the sedative. I feel as if I'd been buried and dug up, and you,' he said, turning to Jonah, 'look like something out of *Hamlet*.'

He left the room, and Isabel rose stiffly and went to the study door. Tremont was sleeping easily. Jonah came and replenished the fire in the little stove, and Isabel, yawning largely, rubbed her cheeks with her cold hands.

'Go on,' whispered Jonah. 'I'll stay with him until Fount comes.'

In the hall Isabel looked for Evan, but he did not appear. She loathed her own weakness, yet longed, in her weariness and love of him, to have him take her in his arms and kiss her. False and light as those kisses might be, they would be hers to treasure after he had gone again, as one treasures the memory of a lovely flower, the taste of some rare fruit.

In her cold bed she lay depressed and uncertain, annoyed by her own unsureness.

Tremont recovered more slowly than he had hoped. The Christmas holidays were quiet and uneventful, and on New Year's Day Evan returned to New York. After he had gone, even the house seemed to miss him. There was a stillness about the place

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that his quick step, his laughter, and his habit of singing whenever the mood struck him, had for a time dispelled.

Jonah had begun to teach at the University and he spent a great deal of his time at home writing in his own room. Tremont, never noisy, had grown quieter after his accident and seemed more and more absorbed in his books. He made a conscientious effort to keep Isabel from being lonely, but he feared in his heart that what she hungered for, he could never give.

They had the electricity put in, and that for a while was both absorbing and entertaining. Ran and Lucile and the two younger children came over the first night the installation was complete and the family had a celebration with party food and Ran banging away at the piano while they sang lustily, 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart,' 'Casey Jones,' and Dorothy's favourite, 'Alexander's Rag-time Band.' It seemed, for that evening at least, like the old gay times, and Tremont could visualize Jennifer sitting there on the sofa tapping one stiff foot and smiling dazzlingly at all of them.

But after this not even the bright lights could make things gay very often. Isabel had no heart for it and the men were content to be quiet and alone.

One day—after a long bleak stretch in March—Isabel could stand it no longer and drove her car into town to see a moving picture. It was a maudlin film with an exotic setting, but it stirred in her all the ardour which she had been at pains to suppress these last few months. When the hero had clutched the heroine in an impassioned if jerky embrace, Isabel felt Evan's kisses upon her lips. When they made love, she relived a dozen little scenes in which she and Evan had stolen futile snatches of happiness. She glowed and sighed and shed furtive tears and when the crude film was ended got up in a daze and stumbled out into the drear March dusk.

As she drove home through the fast-darkening countryside, she felt that she could not bear to go into the house, bright with the lights she had thought would bring her so much pleasure and which now only emphasized the house's largeness, a house with

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everything in it but the one thing which filled it with delight for her.

Frightened at her own weakness she resorted to the trick she had used before. She set herself to taking stock of those things which she had achieved in her marriage to Tremont, telling herself firmly that what she felt for Evan could be cured and that his fickle, gay, and often tormenting love was not worth the sacrifice she would have to make for it.

She knew, too, that yielding to the sort of emotional debauch she had just experienced was as dangerous as if she had been a confirmed drunkard and had been sampling liquor. The desire for it would grow with each taste until she would no longer be able to bear her terrible thirst and the need would consume her. There was only one way to be rid of it, and that was to satiate herself with other less perilous things.

She had got herself in hand when she reached the long drive and saw the lights of the house through the trees. She put her little car into the shed which Tremont had had built near to the kitchen wing for her and went indoors. The air was damp and had a hint of spring out here in the country. The house looked imposing in the dusk with the lights streaming out of the windows. She could see Fount, in his white jacket, rushing around the dining-room like a dragon-fly. From every window the beauty of the place shone out in polished wood, portraits, glinting gold frames, and lovely wallpaper. There was something very satisfying at the orderliness and luxury of the place.

As she came in at the back door of her sitting-room where the firelight lay over the rich turkey-red rugs, she felt that her emotional storm that afternoon had really cleared the air, and that now she had at long last come to her senses.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SUDDENLY the world was green and the paths through the woods between Riverridge and The Chimneys were no longer corridors between black trunks and branches, but tunnels of sweet leaves through which the sun filtered in an aqueous light.

Jonah and Lutie walked here one morning hand in hand. Lutie was twelve now and her pigtails almost reached the belt of her gingham dress. Her hair was dark with unexpected glints of gold which ran in thick streaks and buried themselves under a darker wave. Her eyes were a sparkling brown and so frank that Jonah often thought Lutie was the only person he knew who looked really *into* your eyes. She was tall, almost to Jonah's shoulder, and her face had a delicate moulding of mouth and brow that was a constant source of delight to him.

He held her hand in his own now as they strolled along, under the green trees.

'Let's go to the creek and see if the minnows are out,' said Lutie, and they cut through the woods to the stream that ran between the two houses and farther out into the country. There they lay and listened to the water, watching the spiders dash across it like skaters, the minnows and tadpoles nibbling the grasses at the water's edge. The mint was coming up thick and dark bluish-green, its rank smell filling the air as they rolled on it. There was a patch of cress in the stream, and Jonah, chewing on

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a bunch and savouring its peppery taste, lay contentedly and watched Lutie. She was playing an old game he had taught her—called 'Things Under Water.' She thrust her hand with the fingers held close together under the clear creek water. Little silver bubbles formed on it. It became the hand of a mermaid, pale green and jewelled with bright pearls. A brown leaf held under likewise became transformed and leaning over close Lutie could see the clean brown pebbles, the little fish and the brown crayfish moving slowly under the greenish water. She scooped up a tadpole and watched it as it lay wriggling on its back on her hand. There was nothing so shiny-black, she thought, and marvelled at the little intestines wound round and round inside the clear belly like the springs in a watch.

'I wonder if it hurts—when their feet come through,' she said, letting the tadpole slide back into the water.

'Mumm,' smiled Jonah drowsily, not wanting to break the comfort of his mood.

'I wish I could get little, about the size of a bee, maybe, and go down there under the water and see everything—the way little Mr. Thimble-Finger did.'

When Jonah didn't reply she went on: 'Only when he got there he didn't see anything—anything new, I mean—no tadpoles and minnows and baby crawfishes—just people like Brer Rabbit and Miss Meadows. I'd want to swim all around in those little holes and into the hollow rocks and under the flat ones——' her voice droned on and Jonah slept.

When he woke a short time later, Lutie was kneeling beside him staring out through the woods to an opening where the sun fell on a patch of yellow lilies, planted perhaps by some settler's wife years ago and gone wild now, to be seen only occasionally on some lucky chance like this.

Her lips were parted and on her face there was an expression of such dreamy delight that Jonah did not move at once, but lay there watching her.

She was whispering some phrase to herself over and over and

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he strained to catch it. What she said was, 'Oh, the beautiful, the beautiful, the sun and the gold and the green and the blue, the beautiful, the beautiful world!'

It was the sort of thing she used to sing as she hopped along beside him when she was four or five—a little tuneless, meterless pæan of joy. He smiled to hear it and turned over softly to stare with her, thinking that the sun on the lilies seen at the edge of the dark woods was a thing he would never forget—that and Lutie's little-girl face as she worshipped them.

Later he walked home through Jennifer's garden and saw the late afternoon shadows on the lawn under the just opening mimosa trees. The house, resplendent in a new coat of paint, shone in the sun like the Taj Mahal. Everywhere there were signs of peace and order. A sense of bliss boiled up within and he felt light and free and comfortable within and without.

He went up the steps, stopping, as Tremont often did, to look out over the garden and to sniff the medley of sweet smells, and then he went in to the cool dark hall, thinking that no one's life could lie in pleasanter ways.

For a moment he didn't see his grandfather, but as his eyes became accustomed to the dusky light he saw him standing there, his head bent, one hand across his eyes as if he were in sudden pain.

'Grandad! What is it?' Jonah cried and hurried forward.

His grandfather looked up, tragedy on his lean face grown paler through this winter's months.

'It's Evan,' he said. 'His father just telephoned from New York—He's——'

'John!'

They looked up at Isabel standing at the head of the stairs. Her tone was piercing and unnatural, her face had the drawn look of a tragic masque.

'What is it? Don't stand there, you two! Tell me—*what has happened to Evan?*'

'He's had an accident,' said Tremont heavily. 'Jim phoned.

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He said Evan was cleaning his gun——' A gasp from Isabel, who was moving slowly down the stairs holding to the rail as though she felt her strength ebbing with every word. 'It went off in some way—Evan ought to know how to handle a gun!—Practically born with one in his hands——'

'Where was he shot?' asked Isabel between her teeth. She had come now and stood beside them, and Jonah saw that she was trembling with a delicate mothlike vibration from head to foot.

'The thing exploded in his face some way. It's his eyes they're worried about—they're operating now. Jim said he'd call again tonight. They may not be able to tell for a week or two—about his sight.'

Jonah, feeling a sickish weakness creep along the backs of his hands and his arms, looked at Isabel, afraid she might faint. Her face was set like stone and very pale and she was still trembling. But she walked past them into her sitting-room and then there was a stillness and they pictured her staring blindly out of the windows. After a long moment, when the ticking of the grandfather's clock filled the hall with its senseless, harrowing sound, they heard a long, raucous sob and the sound of her body as she flung herself into the deep armchair. Tremont shook his head and began to pace up and down, and Jonah, sitting suddenly on the red sofa, put his face in his hands. Later he went into the parlour where his grandfather had gone to sit, and stared out of the long windows at the late sunlight on the lawn. He thought of Lutie kneeling and saying 'Oh, the beautiful, the beautiful!' of the sunlight on the lilies and the colour and shadows in the garden. He thought that Evan might never see these again, and love and grief swept over him in a torrent. He stumbled upstairs to his room and lay on his bed fighting back the hot tears, seeing over and over Evan's vivid, laughing face and the dark, gold-lashed eyes that were never still, but always dancing with anger or mischief, and all the old envy was washed away. Only love and this terrible, terrible pity were left and a hunger to have Evan with him again.

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At a late and miserable supper with every nerve tense for the possible ringing of the telephone, Isabel said suddenly to Tremont, 'How do you think it happened? You said yourself that Evan knew how to handle a gun.'

'Jim didn't say. It could have been a fault in a shell—Jim was too excited to be coherent. It had just happened about an hour before and they had him at the hospital.'

'He said it was an accident? That it was Evan's own gun?'

'He said so. I was too shocked myself to take in everything he said. But I got the impression that Evan was merely cleaning the gun or playing with it—it was at the office for some reason. They took him at once to the hospital. God! It's too horrible!' He turned from the table dabbing at his mouth with his napkin in a hand that trembled.

They left the half-eaten meal and trailed into Isabel's sitting-room as if by common consent, since it was nearest to the telephone in the hall. They sat in the semi-darkness in silence while outside the insects blared in melancholy monotony.

When the telephone rang, they sprang up and Tremont hurried into the hall, the other two close behind him. A breathless heaviness that was at once cold and oppressive lay upon them as Tremont said in a strained voice, 'Yes? Yes? This is he—hello, Jim. What news of Evan?'

Then there were long and even more oppressive pauses while they could hear James Crockett's voice rasping in the 'phone and the agony of their impatience gnawed at them.

'I see,' said Tremont. 'I was afraid that it would be some time. Poor boy! We're just knocked out about it down here. Call us again in the morning, Jim, and let us know how he is.—Does he suffer much? Um! Poor boy!—I'm afraid so. As soon as he's able, we'll come up and bring him down here. It's quiet and he knows his way about—'

Isabel moaned and put her hands to her face. And Jonah felt again the weakness that had come over him earlier. If Evan had to be in a place that he could feel his way about, that meant

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that there was no hope of his seeing. He dared not look at Isabel.

Tremont was ending the conversation with messages of sympathy to James Crockett. Then he hung up the receiver and the three stood for a moment in the dark hall.

'The doctor's can't tell. There's a faint hope, but very faint. They think he'll probably be blind,' he said, and walked into his office and shut the door.

Isabel and Jonah went back into the sitting-room and Jonah lighted one of the lamps.

'We ought to tell Lucile,' he said. 'Would you like to walk over there with me?'

'No,' said Isabel, and Jonah knew that she was thinking of the nights she had walked with Evan. She stared at the cold hearth which Fount had banked with pine branches. Her face was inscrutable, as pale and closed as a hard white rosebud.

'I'll give him this room,' she said suddenly. 'He could come and go easily here. We'll have to think of ways to keep him from brooding—he's always been so active. We'll get a talking machine and records and have people in to visit him. Perhaps he'll be able to ride—if he can see a little.'

The picture of Evan dependent on a few musical records and Isabel's gossiping friends, Evan who lived in a saddle and loved to hunt and tramp the woods—to be free, who had been independent since he could walk—was too much for Jonah. He got up and said: 'I'll be back shortly. Don't worry too much. Maybe Jim'll have better news in the morning.'

Out under the stars, walking on the dark, sweet earth, he breathed deeply and felt guilty to be glad to be out of the house away from the contagious misery of the others. He wondered if they would ever know just how the accident had occurred—or if it were an accident. Was it possible that Evan loved Isabel and had grown desperate over the hopelessness of their situation? Or had he done something crooked in the hope of getting rich quick, something James Crockett was ignorant of or was conceal-

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ing for his son's sake? Whatever the answer, Jonah knew that from now on Evan's blindness would affect them all. The problem of his adaptation was their problem; but Evan alone would have to bear the terrible burden of his solitude. A line from Job, which had terrified Jonah when he had been a small boy, came back to him with the thunderous quality of portentous prophecy — 'Wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.'

He looked up through the spring night at the sweet bright stars above him and his heart seemed to break with the pity which swelled in it.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

IN June, Ransome and Lucile went North to see Dorothy graduate from an Eastern college. Tremont and Isabel went with them to bring Evan back to Riverridge. Jonah was to stay at The Chimneys and keep an eye on little Ran and Lutie while Fount looked after the house at Riverridge. The farm had run so systematically for years now that more and more Tremont could turn it over for brief periods to his Negro overseers. He determined to make the trip as much a holiday as possible for himself and Isabel, and as Ran was in his usual high spirits, not even Isabel's anxiety about Evan or Lucile's about little Ran could quite dampen the occasion. Ran chartered a private car, sent flowers to 'the girls,' and loaded them with books, boxes of candy, and magazines. Tremont grinned at his childish enjoyment of the money he flung around and wondered, as he often did, what had attracted the sensitive Lucile to this boisterous plutocrat.

It was impossible to dislike Ran, because he was utterly good-natured. He loved giving things to people, paying them attention, having them like him. There wasn't, Tremont told himself, a mean or stingy bone in Ran's body—or a crooked one. It was simply that he never had a thought that was not materialistic. He recognized no wound which greenbacks could not staunch.

He and Isabel could drain the last bit of enjoyment out of

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material pleasures; the most casual things amused them when they were both in a good humour, and Tremont, watching them as the four played whist together or as Ran pointed out places of interest to them along the way, thought gratefully that it was their similarly equable natures which had helped to heal the breach between the two families and to keep the relationship smooth and impersonally pleasant.

'He and Isabel balance Lucile and me,' he thought tolerantly. 'She and I are too inclined to brood, I'm afraid. They have been good for us,' and he smiled at Isabel so that she coloured faintly, knowing that in his innocence he never guessed that always, under apparent frankness, Ran made subtle but persistent love to her.

At The Chimneys, Jonah enjoyed a vacation from his daily trips to town and renewed his delight in Lutie's companionship. He read aloud to her while she did small domestic jobs like sewing and silver-polishing and pea-shelling, which Lucile had assigned to her. They read *Les Misérables* and the poems of an obscure young poet named Robert Frost. They read the things which Lutie had to read at school—'Horatius at the Bridge' and 'The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere'—and Lutie was never to hear them again in her life without thinking of the peaceful quiet of the porch at The Chimneys, of the scent of honeysuckle, the cries of the nesting wrens, and Jonah's voice, gentle and passionate, ringing with his enjoyment in the familiar words.

Small Ran was a boisterous and friendly child, as much like his father as the hand is like the glove. He had no inhibitions and had long been a familiar figure at Riverridge, where he trotted behind Tremont in the fields and gardens, or beside Isabel as she went about her household duties. He was apparently never still, and if the person he was with settled down with a book or to sedentary work, he was up and off seeking other, more interesting diversion.

Having no background for Lucile's feeling about Isabel, he adored her. She was pretty to look at, and her easy indifference to him suited a wigglesome, investigating little boy who resented

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supervision. She was perhaps fonder of him than she had ever been of any child and took a certain pride in his devotion to her. She brought him presents from town, which annoyed Lucile, as they were usually extravagant and unsuitable, and by a careless system of spoiling and indifference won his complete and impulsive loyalty. Isabel, holding him on her lap and curling one of the thick ruddy curls around her finger, dreamed that he was the child that she and Evan might have had and he took on a significant dearness to her.

Now that Isabel and his grandfather were away from River-ridge, Ran was at home more, and Jonah became the victim of his incessant activity. Watching him, Jonah thought, 'He's the last sturdy male member of the family—with Evan blinded, perhaps for life, and me with my no-good leg and lack of any business sense.' And he wondered if coupled with Ransome Parks' genial energy and lack of self-consciousness there was a streak of the Tremont sensitivity and love of those things which money cannot buy. In the time they spent together, he tried to impress on the little boy a sense of the wonder and beauty of the world. But Ranny would turn impatiently from contemplating the intricate heart of a lily or the shape of a stone, the changing colour of a fish as it swam through sun and shadow, and demand that Jonah build a house of rocks or an 'ormobile' of chips, a train or a dam. From Ran and perhaps from Jennifer he had inherited a forward-looking nature. His world would be a mechanical one, his vision always of great spans of steel, or mighty towers of brick, of wheels and chains. There would be no room for roses.

When Evan had been established at Riverridge, in his old room by request, life there shifted again and took on a new focus. On that first day when he had arrived, pale and quiet and with a bandage over his eyes, there had been the hush and the suppressed excitement which goes with tragedy. But soon Evan, with a gallantry which amazed and touched them, began to disperse that feeling of emergency. As far as was possible, he entered into the old life and resumed his gay and bantering way. Fount,

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relieved of his dining-room duties, was made his personal valet, while Isabel gladly relinquished Jinny to take over the downstairs work which, with Delia's help and Fount's occasional assistance, she was able to handle.

Jonah, going into Evan's room in the early morning, would hear him say: 'What kind of a day is it, Fount? Sun going to shine this morning?' and Fount would say: 'Sun am shinin', boss. Purtiest day you ever did see—jes' lak a dream. River's purty, too, shinin' and brown. When yo' eyes heals up, we'll go swimmin'.'

Fount was wonderful for Evan. His natural cheerfulness, his gentle ministrations, his optimistic plans for the future, were all tonic.

The doctors had not declared Evan's case entirely hopeless, but neither had they given him the promise that he would have anything like normal vision. Jonah often wondered if there were not long dark hours in which Evan fought against despair and brooded over his own tedious future. But if there were, he never let them intrude on the family. There were bouts of pain and the harrowing occasions, three times a week, when he went in town to have the dressings changed, and when the old pain, stirred up again, seemed to rack him to the soul. But even then he was considerate, going to his room and lying in agonized silence until the worst was over, when he would ask Fount to send him Isabel. She would go and sit with him, stroking his hands and talking to him of trivial things until he could bear to stand on his feet again and shortly he would be his old, gay self.

For Isabel this regime was almost entirely satisfactory. Here, without any volition on her part, was the very thing she had wanted—her position as mistress of Riverridge intact, with Evan almost completely dependent on her and available at all times for adoration. But her love of him—which made her suffer when he suffered and which at times made her writhe with frustration—worked on her like any sacrificial passion. She became thinner and took on an almost spiritual beauty which Jonah found ironic, feeling as he did that she was an adulteress in everything but the specific art.

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There was only one fly in this holy ointment. That fly was Peggy Little. She arrived at mid-morning on the day after Evan's homecoming with fruit and flowers and murmured solicitations which to Isabel's chagrin—for the family had carefully avoided open pity—Evan lapped up as a kitten laps up cream.

After that, Peggy came almost daily, assuming an attitude of intimacy which irritated Isabel more and more. Day after day Peggy took Evan for long rides in her buggy and Isabel was miserable picturing them stopping in shady lanes to talk or perhaps make love in the lush beauty of the midsummer woodlands.

At the house they talked of people out of their mutual pasts, whom Isabel had never known. They laughed and argued about horses and dogs and the possible outcomes of races, recollected hunts they had attended and discussed the attributes of familiar trainers. Sometimes they became so absorbed that they forgot Isabel was in the room and she slipped out, filled with angry jealousy, while their laughter followed her about the house.

She had to confess that Peggy was a great help in filling the long, idle hours for Evan, and that her visits did much to cheer him up, but there was always the fear that her persistent and unabashed wooing might take effect and that Evan would be removed from Isabel's ministrations forever.

Peggy had all the advantages. She was unattached, the spoiled only child of an indulgent father; she had a more than adequate independent income and she had no scruples about using all her charm to woo Evan, not only out of his own tragedy, but into her arms.

So for several weeks the silent battle went on to the edification and often the amusement of Jonah, who could see only one outcome and, in spite of himself, pitied Isabel because of it.

From the first night that Ransome Parks had met Isabel at Riverridge, she had held a secret fascination for him. In her he found what he had mistakenly hoped to find in Lucile. What he had taken for cool aloofness in Lucile—a coolness and an aloofness which he had hoped to enjoy breaking down—had been timidity

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and a sort of secrecy which annoyed and baffled him. He had dreamed, when he first met Lucile, that she would be a woman cold to all other men but him, and that under her seeming reticence there would burn a passion all the more potent for its habitual restraint. He had dreamed of storming this fair fortress and of awakening the sleeping lover who was surely there behind Lucile's breeding and gentleness. But he had never found her. After nearly twenty years of matrimony, she was as baffling and as unsatisfactory to him as she had ever been.

When he had first looked on Isabel's chaste and unstirred beauty, the old dream of power and lordliness had sprung to life again, like the thick green leaves of some sturdy plant which has been ruthlessly pruned back for winter. He had watched her through these few years, and her calculating selfishness, her determination to set her feet in comfortable paths, had not shocked him; it had only deepened his admiration for her. And when, just before her marriage to Tremont, he had held her for a moment in his arms and kissed her, even though she had not responded, the flame of his desire for her was fed until he dreamed of those moments and yearned to repeat them. He had seen her growing interest in Evan, and the fact that the younger man had awakened her made him wish that he had tried harder to stir her himself. He thought of Evan as too young and callow to offer real opposition and felt confident that he could have swept the girl into passionate response if he had really cared to. At the same time his dreams were nebulous and transient, as he had never faced the reality of the consequences of such a situation, should he have succeeded in precipitating it. It was simply something he liked to think about when for some reason his pride or his sensuality had suffered. He was essentially conventional, and his social and business standing meant too much to him to jeopardize them by any flagrant breach of decency. He never really carried the idea beyond these vague, sensuous dreams, but they were satisfying—like the smoking of some drug—and they lent a stimulation to his every contact with Isabel. The trip

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to New York had given them a greater intimacy than ever, and that with Isabel's tenderness towards Evan had fired anew Ransome's flame of desire.

Both he and Lucile had come often to Riverridge in an attempt to help entertain Evan until he should get himself completely adjusted; but now Ransome strolled over almost every night after dinner and Lucile found herself reluctantly suspicious that Evan and her father were not the only attractions.

Isabel, too, had begun to notice the frequency of Ran's visits, and his attentions, which she had never taken seriously, began to penetrate her consciousness. Like Ransome, she did not think this out to any real conclusion. She simply welcomed the opportunity to prove to herself that she could be attractive to another man.

Evan was in much less pain now. Every day saw some progress in his determination to adapt himself to his handicap. He had trained Crescent to take him on certain roads and bring him back and was free now to go places without irksome chaperonage. That this made more freedom for his friendship with Peggy Little, Isabel was bitterly aware, but as she disliked horses and could think of no legitimate excuse for curtailing one of Evan's few pleasures, she had to bear this knowledge in silence.

She tried to forget her hunger for him in an interest in Tremont and his affairs, but he had become more silent and self-contained than ever in the last few months, as though Evan's accident had shocked him, and he had occasional twinges of pain from the fall he suffered during the winter. He read a great deal, sat on the porch in the sun, and to Isabel seemed definitely an old and weary man.

For Dorothy that summer was one of unmarred bliss. She woke to gay expectancy and went to sleep to dream of luncheons, parties, bouquets, dances, beaux, and buggy rides. The Chimneys stayed in a constant happy furor of dressmakings and fittings, florists' boxes and youthful callers. The whole world seemed to have turned into a fluffy-ruffle fairyland of gay parasols, gay people, gay times, and so much food that Lucile groaned at the mention of bread-and-butter.

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Under all this atmosphere of youth and happiness there ran a black thread of misery for Lucile, who could no longer hide from herself the fact that Ransome was definitely infatuated with Isabel and to Lucile's fevered mind it seemed that Isabel was flagrantly leading him on. The summer was terrifically hot. Lucile lost weight and looked haggard and sallow. She had the feeling that she had just recovered from a prolonged illness and was still a little faint and 'queer' in the head. She seemed to herself to be two personalities—one the kind and interested and busy mother of her family, and the other a sort of ghost, an invading other soul who mourned within her.

She found that, taut as she was with domestic details and this gnawing at her heart, she could not sleep, and often when Ran lay and snored beside her she rose and went down the cool stairs, out into the garden she had had made on the south side of the house, and walked beneath the stars or in the pale luminous night, loving the surcease from activity, the cool quiet of the woods around her, wondering a little hopelessly if Ran would ever come back to her.

In July the rains had come, and this solitude, from which she drew a spiritual content, was denied her. She took to walking about the house at night watching the garden flare into brilliant colour with the lightning, listening to the drum of the hard summer rains. But there was not the peace in these rambles there had been in the sweet freshness of outdoors. She grew more and more unhappy, the old longing for Jennifer and the bitter wish that they had been closer in life came back and she spent many miserable hours staring into the darkness, her lids stiff with tears.

One night, when it did not rain but was heavy with a portentous heat, Ran went to Riverridge, and Lucile, having reached a stage in her unhappiness where she prodded it like an aching tooth, followed him. He found Isabel pacing the lawn under the mimosa and oak trees and he joined her there, pulling her arm through his with an ease that bespoke long habit. Lucile, standing in the shadows, watched while the two on the lawn paced back and

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forth, barely visible in the lights from the house, in and out of the dappled shadows. They murmured and laughed softly and to Lucile's ears every word sounded like a caress, every laugh seemed the result of conspiracy.

Behind the river and the ridge lightning flickered more and more fiercely, like gigantic visible pains of the storm's imminent birth. The wind rose and the treetops, roiled and murmuring, bent beneath it. Lucile, who hated storms, turned and began to run back to The Chimneys. She ran through her mother's garden where the scent of the loosened earth mingled with the heavy fragrance of stock and nicotina. The path through the woods was dark and frightening; little branches reached out with seeming maliciousness and scratched her face. She was hot and wet with exertion and nervousness. The house seemed to go farther and farther away, like a desired destination in a nightmare. Worse than her fear of the storm, worse than the pain that was tearing at her chest, worse than the degradation she felt at having spied on Ran, was the fear that he would come hurrying along behind her and find that she had been near Riverridge. She reached the back door at last and, clutching at it, stumbled into the kitchen. She stood for a few minutes leaning on the table panting, trying to stop the hoarse, cutting breath that seared her throat. At last she moved stiffly to the sink and cupping her hands drank copiously of the warmish water. She thought, *'How thin my hands are!'* and began to cry weakly with self-pity and the memory of the terror which had pursued her.

Then there was Ran's step on the drive, she heard him hurry to the barn and close the doors on his cars. She turned and went upstairs; her legs felt full of sawdust, her head was pounding. In the bathroom she switched on the light and stared at herself in the looking-glass. She was paler than she had ever seen herself and her eyes looked sunken and red. Across one cheek was a small weal and on her forehead a bloody scratch. She was shocked and thought, terrified, *'How could I explain this to Ran?'* She began to tear off her clothes, throwing them on top of the

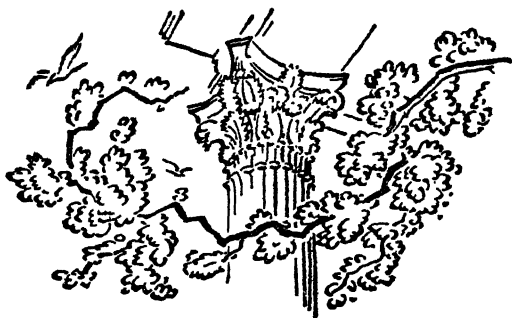
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laundry basket. She washed her face and hands hastily and wiped away the blood, smoothed her tangled hair. Inside of her a drear little voice kept wailing, 'O God! O God! O God!' She snapped off the light and, opening the door, listened. She could hear Ran humming in the kitchen—probably fixing himself a snack. She felt with sudden revulsion that everything he did was sensual and then with justice thought, 'He can't help it—he's so big—so healthy!' The prospect of lying sleepless in the bed in the warm upstairs bedroom, of his coming to her from Isabel and perhaps wanting her, was suddenly maddening to her. She went back in the dark and fumbled in the medicine cabinet for her sleeping pills. She had not resorted to them in months, but she needed them tonight. She poured several into her hand and tossed them into her mouth, hastily washing them down with water from the bathroom glass which always, in spite of any number of washings, tasted like toothpaste and bath powder. It was not until she had swallowed them that she realized the size of the dose. Had it been two or three—even four?

'I don't care,' she thought, and crawled on to the high bed. *'I don't care if I never wake up—of course I do—I wouldn't leave little Ran and Lutie—but it would be good—just relief—just nothingness.'*

She relaxed deeply into the bed's softness. A breeze had sprung up and she was conscious of the grateful feel of it on her face, along her tired legs. Then the rain came in a gusty down-pour. She worried vaguely about open windows, and Ranny's bed and thought wearily, *'Ran's there—let him look after it.'*

The breeze was so good! It was so soothing. She was too tired now even to cry. When Ran came up to bed, she was sleeping soundly. She lay on her back and breathed heavily. He thought with amusement that he had never heard her snore before. It kept him awake a little while, but presently his own snoring drowned out the sound of her labouring breath. He slept as he did everything else, whole-heartedly and well. That was why he did not notice it when a few hours later, as the thunder rumbled, Lucile shuddered and choked and stopped breathing altogether.



CHAPTER TWENTY

THE 'Kissin' Kin' came seldom to Riverridge now. Cud'n Algie and his sister turned up occasionally at Christmas, and the others 'stopped by' when they took trips on which the farm made a convenient break; but their attitude towards Isabel was so plainly one of disapproval that Tremont had given up urging them to come.

For Lucile's funeral, however, they turned out *en masse*. They came as quickly as possible and it looked as if they meant to stay on indefinitely. On a hot and oppressive afternoon in early August there were still three of them in the house including Cud'n Algie, and Isabel's nervous dislike of them was growing with every hour. She had heard their outraged whispers in the guest bedrooms (whispers which sometimes rose in forgetful indignation) and she had been aware of their doleful and significant glances.

She knew now that they considered her an outrageous hussy who had married poor John before poor Jennifer was cold in her grave, who had brought down the wrath of the Almighty upon the house—witness all the bad luck that had occurred since she had come to Riverridge with her scheming and her wickedness! First Jennifer, then Evan, then Lucile, and now poor John probably on his deathbed with a cold he caught standing in the rain at Lucile's funeral. In witch-burning days, Evan had

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said to Isabel, highly amused at the head-waggings, they would have done something drastic to her like boiling her in oil to drive the devil out of her and to free Riverridge from the curse of her blonde wickedness.

'You *are* still blonde, aren't you?' he had asked, denying the wistfulness of his voice with a grin.

And Isabel, irritated to the point of screaming with sheer nerves, had put her head on his shoulder and sobbed just as Cousin Lucy Parsons had walked in. Evan's addressing Isabel as 'Grandma' while he soothed her, only added insult to injury in the old lady's mind. She sniffed and flounced and wriggled on her straight-backed chair until Isabel put on an act of humility to disarm her and said, 'I'm sorry—I guess I'm tired,' and went meekly out.

Her thinness was discussed at length in audible conjectures. They were sure she was newly 'in a family way'—a term which set Isabel's teeth on edge—and this further fanned the fury of their righteous indignation. They split into factions, those who thought it was disgusting of John to have an offspring at his age and those who were sure the child was not John's at all. The fact that there might be no child was one they chose to ignore.

Isabel went about torn between a seething fury and a desire to burst out laughing. The climax came when, five days after the funeral, three still sat about like buzzards and showed no signs of taking flight. Cud'n Algie, who had discovered the key to the sideboard, took Isabel aside in the dining-room and in a muzzy attempt at sympathy told her not to let them upset her. Between hiccoughs he confided that he did not disapprove of her marriage to John—that it had a Biblical precedent. Moses, he said, or Isaiah or 'one of those old birds,' had had a young gal put in bed with him to warm him. He still had a wife living, too, Cud'n Algie thought—putting his mind on the subject with great effort. Taking a swallow from the glass in his hand, he added, 'Can't remember, t' save m' soul whether it warmed him—hic—or not.'

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Three extra people in the house with two sick men to care for, and one of the three drinking steadily the whole time and all gossiping about their hosts, suddenly seemed to Isabel too much to be borne.

She snatched the glass from Cud'n Algie's tremulous hand and threw it on the floor, where it broke with a shocking crash.

'I want you to get your things packed and go home!' she said. 'All of you! Mr. Tremont is ill—he needs my attention. I haven't time to fool with you and not one of you is any help here. You're a pack of interfering, malicious, gossipy old women, all of you, and I want you out of this house before dark this afternoon!'

Cud'n Algie's jaw dropped. His eyes filled with tears. He stared at her blankly for a moment and then, drawing himself up said with grandiose dignity, 'Madame, I have never been so insulted in all—hic—my life! I shall speak to my Cousin John. This is still his house—our fam'ly home—I never expected'—he began to whimper—'put out in m' old age——' He turned and hobbled towards the door, but Isabel blocked the way.

'John is too ill to be bothered by you,' she said in a low tone. 'Don't you go near him or I'll have Fount throw you out! Go and tell your sister and your cousin what I have said—I want this house cleared by tonight. You aren't here because you want to be of any help—you aren't here because you care for anybody—you're here because you're nosy and wicked, and I hate the whole snivelling, whispering, gossiping pack of you!'

She looked up to see Jonah standing at the head of the stairs, his face white and his eyes wide with shock.

'Isabel!' he said tragically. 'You can't talk to them like that!' He ran downstairs, his limp more pronounced for his haste, and said, catching her arm, 'Why, you're cruel—you're rude! You can't insult people in this house!'

'That's what I told her!' shouted Cud'n Algie triumphantly. 'Never been so inshulted in my life! Goin' to John, I am—a relative, put out of his house! Why, John would—John would have a fit!'

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'You're going to pack your bag and get out!' said Isabel hardly. 'Talk about insults'—she shook her arm free of Jonah. 'They've done nothing but insult me since they've been here. They've discussed my marriage to John, they've talked about my intimate life and torn my character to shreds. They eat and drink everything they can lay their hands on, my servants wait on them hand and foot, and they sneak behind doors and spy on me and tear me to shreds with their malicious, envious tongues! They are leaving this house tonight—I have Evan and your grandfather, both ill and a care, and I'm worn out! Talk about inhospitality, about insults, about politeness—the shoe fits the other foot!

'I'll send Fount and Jinny to help you pack,' she added, and went upstairs. She posted Evan by Tremont's door and said, 'Sit with your legs across it and don't let a soul in. I won't have him disturbed, not if he kills me for this.'

In less than an hour the three stood on the lawn and waited for a wall-eyed Fount to bring the surrey around. As he drove them and their baggage off, Isabel stood menacingly at the head of the steps and watched them go. Saved from horrible death beneath the carriage wheels only by the vise-like grip of Cud'n Lucy, who was purple with rage, Cud'n Algie leaned out and screamed hoarsely, 'No more'n I expected—damn' *Yankee!*'

Isabel controlled a furious impulse to take off her shoe and hurl it at him.

She went indoors and wept. Wept because they had beaten her down, had forced her to act like a shrew, because she had given them food for endless gossip, because Jonah was coldly silent about the whole episode, and because she was afraid John would have the same reaction. Only Evan applauded her and said, 'That's something that should have happened long ago'—and took her in his arms and kissed her tears away.

They were gone, but they had left something behind them that was like an unpleasant odour and could not be shaken off. Isabel felt as guilty as if she had been caught stealing. She went about

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her tasks saying, *'I was right. Everything I said was true—they were the wicked ones, the rude ones—eating our salt, and picking us to pieces—'* but she could not shake off a portentous sense of having put herself in the wrong.

For the first time in months she felt sharply the difference between herself and these people she had chosen to adopt. Jonah had put it into words when he said, *'You can't be rude to people in this house!'* They had a code which was stupid to her and maudlin—a code which said that, once under their roof, a guest was always right. She felt a contempt for the code, but an admiration for the people who could live up to it—and she knew that she had betrayed herself as not being one of them when she broke that code, however silly it might be.

Yet by six o'clock she no longer cared, for the doctor, dropping by for his twice daily check-up on Tremont, came out of her room with a look of weariness and gravity on his face that frightened her.

'Is he worse?' she asked.

He stood looking at her a moment, this pale, almost austere-looking woman, who in her early twenties had the poise and maturity of expression of a woman twice that age. She was dressed in white which enhanced her paleness, and in the slender stem of her neck he saw, in the bright light of the dying sun, a pulse beating nervously. He suddenly felt sorry for her, although he had never particularly liked her before.

'He's not doing anything to get well,' he said, and looked at her searchingly. He wondered how frank he could be with her. *'He seems to be taking his daughter's death very badly.'*

'He was devoted to her and it was a shock—the unexpectedness of it.' Said Isabel: *'Won't you come down to my sitting-room—Jonah is with John, isn't he? I—perhaps there are things you ought to tell me—whether or not we should have a nurse—what we should do in case he gets worse—'* She gestured to the stairs and when he bowed she turned and went down. The sun slanting through the open front door streaked her with

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rose, blazed about her pale head. He noticed her straight back, the shoulder-blades which, since she had grown thin this summer, showed through her white dress. He wondered what would happen to her when Tremont died, as he must while she was still a young woman.

In the sitting-room she motioned him to a chair and said simply, 'Tell me.'

'He's worse. The congestion is worse and he's weaker. But the most fearful thing is his apathy. I wonder——' He paused and pulled at his lower lip, looking at the floor.

'You wonder if he is happy enough with me to want to live,' she said, and he stared at her, appalled that she should put his thoughts into words so crudely.

'That wasn't exactly——'

'I think he is,' she said. 'We married,' she shrugged, 'for convenience, I suppose you'd say. We've been very content. I wanted a home—he needed a—housekeeper. I've tried to do everything as he wanted it. We made no pretence of loving each other—not as he loved Mrs. Tremont.'

'*And not as you could—perhaps do—love some other man!*' thought the doctor and gave up the hope of his patient's recovery. He had known John and Jennifer for a long time and he felt that it would be impossible to supplant that first love in the heart of a man so gentle and loyal as Tremont.

To himself he said sadly, '*My friend John will never come back,*' and remembered how just a few weeks before he had predicted that John would live for twenty years.

'It's—his heart,' he said, and Isabel looked at him sharply.

'But you said—last winter, remember—that his heart was good for years! You said he had no heart trouble.'

The doctor rose. He stood looking out into the back garden, across the fields to the river.

'We are often mistaken about the heart,' he said, and wondered if she knew he spoke ambiguously. 'We know very little about it, really. So many things can affect it—exposure, infection,

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a shock such as Lucile's death was to him. That and the infection from this cold—pneumonia is treacherous. I—I should advise you to prepare yourself for the worst.'

He moved across the room and into the hall, picking up his hat. 'I'll send a nurse out—he should have someone with him every minute. She's very competent—a Miss Cranford. She'll tell you what to do. I'll be back again at midnight—but call me at any time if there seems to be any change.'

He went away, leaving Isabel more depressed than ever, and with the feeling that she would never have done with death and its horrid accompaniments.

'It's what I get for moving in with old people,' she told herself, and went into the dining-room to see if Fount had swept up the glass she had broken.

He hadn't, so she got the broom and a dustpan and did it herself. Then she noticed that the key was in the sideboard. She opened the door and looked in and forgot her misery for a moment in her wrath at the inroads Cud'n Algie had made on the choice liquors there.

'John will be furious!' she thought, and suddenly was aware that John might never know—he might never know anything more about Riverridge—or care.

She had not thought what would happen if John died. What would become of the house—of her. She had never asked him anything about a will or what she would be responsible for at his death, but she recalled the bleak looks, the bitter whisperings of the past few days, and felt that she would get no consideration from his family. For a moment she regretted, with a sharp fear, that she had turned them against her. Suppose he had left the house to Jonah! She tried to remember what it was that Jennifer had said that first day at Riverridge. Had she meant that Jonah *would* inherit or merely that he *should* inherit because he bore the family name? Was it merely a ruminating remark—*'he should carry on this place'*—or something the old lady meant to act upon?

Isabel's heart beat faster, and in spite of a feeling of guilt,

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she played with the idea of marrying Jonah, Jonah, who was too gentle to rule her, who loved the place as she did and who stayed in a fog most of the time, his mind buried in some book or manuscript. But Jonah was angry at her, maybe he would ask her to leave. Her mind leaped back and forth like a frightened small animal, seeking some shelter, some comfort, from this sudden, terrifying prospect.

The thought of Evan came to her like an old dull pain she must try to ignore. Now that she was on the verge, perhaps, of being free, she was no closer to him than ever, no more sure of him. He occasionally kissed her still, as if, in his vitality and exuberance and his naturally sensuous nature, he must kiss someone, but his sardonic grin and his flirtations with Peggy left Isabel just as unsatisfied and as helpless as ever. It had become increasingly harder to suppress her feeling about him with the stimulus of his attentions to Peggy Little. His nearness and the easy familiarity of their relationship constantly sapped her resolution to put her love of him away from herself, and as Tremont had become less aware and more introvert, Isabel, in her loneliness and natural longing, had turned more and more often to Evan. The whole affair had the added attraction of impermanence, an uncertainty which lent a zest to it. For Isabel doubted that, even if she were free, even if she could win him to her, she could, in the end, give up her material gains for anything Evan Crockett could offer her. It was a question of how long she could eat her cake and have it, too, and now the end seemed near.

Jonah walked on the lawn in the blackness of the sultry August night. He had been with his grandfather since early morning drinking quantities of cold tea, but unable to get anything else past a throat that was closed with unbearable misery.

This was the end—he felt it with a certainty that would accept no comfort. Before another midday the wit, the gentleness, the knowledge, the human companionship, of the man he knew best would be, dispelled, never to be assembled again.

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Jonah looked skyward, yearning as all mortals do for some symbol, some promise of comfort. A star sailed across the blackness in a brilliant arc, another dropped like a plummet through countless miles of space and vanished over the rim of the world.

Something in the sense of infinity which these 'wandering stars' gave to him lifted him out of himself, made his grief seem remote and impersonal. He went down the driveway to the road that led to The Chimneys between the fields and the woods, and, leaning upon the railing fence as his grandfather had so often done, looked out over the fields to the river. The corn was so high he could only glimpse the glistening water, the night so dark he could not be sure he saw it at all. It was sultry and still with a drone of insects and no sound of man anywhere. On the ridge a whip-poor-will cried, its quick, soft voice lashing the stillness. Something stirred behind him in the underbrush, was silent on the soft dirt road and scuttled through the sweet potato vines on the other side of the fence. A small, terrified creature, it transferred some of its fear to Jonah. He felt his skin creep and the lonely darkness bore down upon him, his grief swelled again, and he turned and limped hurriedly back to the house where there were lights and other people almost as anxious as he.

In the house Ran tried to get him to go to bed, but Jonah refused. He could not put into words the feeling he had about these last hours with his grandfather. Time seemed to have lost its shape—the moments were elongated like a soap-bubble which hangs heavily from a clay pipe and does not regain its shape until it is released. After his grandfather was gone, time would snap back into place, but now every agonizing moment was drawn out and accentuated and, at the same time, to be treasured because they were fragile and beautiful with their very agony, and, once gone, were never to be experienced again.

In a way his grandfather's dying was his own, Jonah reflected. It was definitely the end of an era, not only in his personal life, but in the community, in a way of living. Isabel might try to

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carry it on, or he, himself, but some graciousness, some ideal, that was instinctive with the older people would merely be assumed with his own generation. The happy days of his childhood and youth were gone, Jonah thought, and he could not bear to stay there and see what would remain. When his grandfather was no longer there, he, too, would leave. He had begun to work consistently on the novel about Jennifer and he would go into town, take a few rooms somewhere, and live in his book.

The nurse had come and had proved to be comfortably efficient without being hard or brusque. She had sent them downstairs while she prepared an injection and got her own bearings, and now only Isabel remained with her. Evan, Ran, and Jonah sat in Isabel's sitting-room and talked.

'I hate to tell Lutie about her grandfather,' Ran said heavily. 'She's made herself sick over her mother already. It's a bad time for a kid her age to hear and see so much of death. She's not old enough to have any outside interests, like Dorothy, and she's not young enough to forget, like Ranny.'

Jonah looked at him, surprised at his intuition. Ran's white suit was rumpled and his face, this breathless night, looked florid and weary. He had been genuinely fond of Lucile's parents, and with a childishness often peculiar to big and simple men he hated the very thought of suffering. Tremont's laboured breathing drove him frantic, and several times Jonah had noticed that when Ran was in the sick-room with each difficult breath of his grandfather's Ran's own breath had come with a painful effort. He knew something of what Ran had been through since Lucile's death the week before, with Dorothy hysterical and rebellious and Lutie lying in a numb apathy which disturbed them all.

'Perhaps we can keep it from her—for a while at least,' said Jonah. 'She's in bed—we'll tell Letha not to let her know. And maybe we won't have to do that even—maybe he'll rally yet. He's never been sick in his life—he *could* get well—'

From the hall they heard Isabel calling fearfully, 'Jonah—Ran—Evan—Come! The nurse says—'

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She broke off and they ran into the hall, up the softly carpeted stairs. Jonah, limping behind the rest, was seized with a horrible panic. He could not face this thing, now that it had come.

They filed into the room on tiptoe and stood about the bed. It was some seconds before Jonah was aware that they were too late. The nurse, hearing his sudden muffled gasp, said, 'Yes—he sat up and said, "It's dark—I can't see!" I knew it was the end, and I sent Mrs. Tremont for you, but before she'd got to the door his face lighted up the way they do sometimes just at the end. He called out to someone—and lifted one hand'—she made a gesture as if reaching towards someone—'and died.'

They stood about him silently until Evan, feeling his way towards her, put his arm about Isabel's shoulders. Ran led them both from the room, but Jonah, lingering, turned back to the nurse and asked, 'The one he called to—at the end—who was it?'

She looked at the door and, seeing that the others were out of earshot, said, 'I think it was his first wife. I didn't want to say so in front of Mrs. Tremont; but was'nt the first one named Jennifer?'

Jonah nodded.

'It was her,' she said, pulling the sheet up and laying it over John's still face. 'He saw her. They often do—just before they go on.'

Jonah stared at her, yearning to believe. She had seen death, this quiet little woman, she was 'acquainted with grief,' and saw people die day in and day out. Yet she believed. Suddenly his agony washed away. Stooping, he laid his cheek against her smooth cool one and gave her a brief hug.

'Bless you!' he said huskily, and went quickly out of the room.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

JOHN'S will and Lucile's were read in the library together on a sultry August afternoon. Isabel sat like a woman listening to the fatal verdict of a jury, pale, with downcast eyes, her hands gripped whitely together. The wills were both brief, John's in order and to the point, Lucile's in her characteristically vague and emotional manner. John's was drawn up by the family lawyer, a Mr. Duff.

John left twenty acres to the north of the main place to Jonah, which, with investments he had inherited from his mother, was a substantial if not spectacular inheritance. He left two thousand dollars to Evan, who had also inherited earlier. To Isabel he left money and investments which would take care of her immediate expenses and provide her with a snug income each month. Rental property and Jennifer's jewels went to Lutie and Dorothy and a few bonds to little Ran, whose father would be able to provide amply for him. There were a number of small bequests to servants.

Mr. Duff, who had been reading the will in a dry monotone, folded the paper and looked at the group before him quizzically.

Jonah looked puzzled, Ran embarrassed, and Isabel startled and stricken. Only Evan, smiling his enigmatic smile, seemed unconcerned.

'But—the house!' breathed Isabel. '*The house!*'

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'Why, the house belonged to Mrs. Parks!' answered Duff, in surprise. 'He deeded it to her in December, 1909.'

Jonah thought that Isabel would have some sort of seizure. She turned deathly pale, and her dark eyes turned to his with a frantic appeal that he found heart-breaking. She half-rose from her chair and then sank back, a slow, turgid flush spreading over features which he had never seen coloured more than a delicate rose with the deepest emotion. He went and stood beside her, putting his hand on her shoulder and felt that mothlike fluttering in her which spoke of shock.

Ran moved restlessly in his chair and bit at his lip. Evan, moving his head eagerly from side to side, obviously longed to read their various expressions.

'I have here Mrs. Parks' will,' said Duff, 'which is not in as specific and proper a form as I might have wished, but which is nevertheless perfectly legal. It is in her own writing and signed by two witnesses.'

He unfolded a piece of letter-paper and cleared his throat. Jonah looked at Isabel under his lashes and saw that her head had dropped and that she was deathly pale, as if indeed she had listened to her death sentence.

I, Lucile Parks [the lawyer read], being sound and in my right mind, do bequeath to my husband, Ransome Parks, the house and estate known as Riverridge and which I have inherited from my mother and father, to be his home as long as he shall live, knowing that he will see to it that my children will be brought up there and will enjoy the same privileges and background which have always been so dear to me.

It was witnessed by two of Lucile's friends and properly signed, but the lawyer shook his head as he folded the paper and said: 'A very bad will. She makes absolutely no specific provision for any of her children. If Mr. Parks had died first and not known of this will, there would have been endless complications about

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the estate and the children might never have inherited River-ridge as Mrs. Parks obviously intended.'

'She made that will just before little Ran was born,' said Ransome heavily. 'She thought she was going to die in childbirth. I knew nothing about it. I suppose she felt a reluctance to discuss it with me.' He sighed, and again Jonah felt an unusual sympathy for him.

'Well, as it stands now, Mr. Parks, you are the present owner of Riverridge. I presume you will make a will at once which will make proper provision for your children's inheritance.'

He gathered up the papers and tucked his handkerchief into his breast-pocket, bowed to the heirs, who seemed unable to make any of the conventional gestures. Only Jonah, as Mr. Duff reached the door, rose and went out into the hall with him.

On the porch the lawyer turned and looked at him.

'Wills are the damndest things,' he said unexpectedly. 'This house—your grandfather's idol, you might say—for he almost worshipped it—the life-work of your grandmother, the natural heritage of you children—in the hands of a man no blood kin, and'—he lowered his voice—'as far as I can observe, not remotely interested in it. If he chooses to marry or if he had close living relatives, the place might go out of the family forever. You must see to it, Jonah, that he makes a will at the first possible opportunity. Lucile's children *must* be protected.'

As he turned indoors, Jonah saw Isabel walking stiffly upstairs, one hand on her breast as if she felt the heart there breaking.

In the parlour Ran stood pulling at his lower lip and gazing at the rug. When Jonah came back, he looked up and said: 'I'm in a hell of a situation, Jo. I don't want this house—I've got no business with it. I've got a house—besides, it ought to be yours by rights. And what about Isabel? We can't just turn the poor kid out into the cold. I'm not goin' to live here! Why, it'd give me the creeps.'

'I don't see why,' said Jonah glumly. He was too depressed at the thought of Riverridge without his grandparents to sym-

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pathize with Ran's embarrassment. "Cile wanted you to live here; the girls would like it. Isabel will probably want to leave now—— As for me—I'd planned to leave, anyway. I'm working hard on my novel, as you know, but somehow being here makes it harder to do. Perhaps I need to get away from everything that ever had to do with Grandmother to see her really clearly. And, too, the life here's too easy, too pleasant. I ought to see something else—ought to have long ago. I feel it in my work, that I'm too sheltered; not that I would have had it otherwise,' he added, smiling. 'It's been wonderful—too good to last.'

'I'll keep the house—for the girls—but I won't live here. I'll tell Isabel. She can stay here till the cows come home, as far as I'm concerned.'

Ransome went out of the room, striding across the hall and up the stairs. Jonah stood alone, thinking of the lawyer's words.

In her room Isabel stood by the long windows and looked down into the yard where she had first seen Evan. She was dressed in black, demurely with a band of white at the throat and wrists which enhanced rather than subdued her beauty. She was fighting back the tears now as she fumbled at the three infinitesimal buttons on her cuff, fighting for control against the hideous unhappiness which engulfed her. The thought that she had lived in this house for years, had loved and thought to possess it, and that all the time it had been Lucile's was unbearable to her.

At Ransome's knock she started and went swiftly across the room. On the other side of the door he could hear the swish of her taffeta petticoat against the sheer material of her dress. He pictured her moving towards him, and for the first time since Lucile's death something of the old fascination for her came over him. When she threw open the door, he saw that her eyes were full of tears and that around them there were pink circles—the eyes of a crying child with very soft skin. He was suddenly so moved that at first he could not speak and, pushing past her, shut the door.

'Poor kid,' he said huskily. 'You shouldn't be up here all

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by yourself. Where's Jinny? I should have brought Dorothy over. I came up to tell you. You're not to think of leaving Riverridge—it's your home as long as you want to stay here—at least till Dorothy marries. Even then she may move away—it's too far ahead to think of now——' He began to walk about the room, and she glanced around hastily to see if she had left out anything in the way of feminine apparel which might embarrass her. But Jinny had tidied the room carefully after Isabel had dressed. It was in its usual state of trimness. By the bed where Tremont had died stood a vase of red roses wilting in the August heat. Ransome fingered one absently.

'You get somebody to stay with you—some woman friend. Jonah's got some notion of movin' to town to write his precious book. Anyway, you shouldn't be here alone with two men—might cause talk——' He stopped, suddenly remembering that it was talk that had put her where she was today—talk and another man's chivalry. He looked self-consciously towards the bed and said, 'Say—you don't sleep in here now, do you?—it's—it's damned creepy. You oughtn't to—not alone——' He stopped again, and stretched his neck in a collar which seemed to have become tight.

Isabel looking at him was suddenly sure of herself.

'No, I sleep across the hall, in the room next to Jonah's—it's really cooler, too. But I dress in here. I haven't moved anything out. Later I will—his things. Then I'll come back.'

As she spoke, she saw—with one of those clear prophetic flashes which was the only way her imagination worked—what she must do. She must give up Evan definitely and soon, and plan to get Riverridge into her hands. Even now, although the thought was old to her, the sacrifice of Evan brought a stab of misery to her heart. She closed her eyes and caught her lower lip under her teeth, and Ransome, seeing her expression of unhappiness, was further moved.

'Don't cry, girly,' he said, patting her shoulder awkwardly. 'And don't you worry your pretty little head. This is your

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home—long as you want it to be. And we'll be good neighbours—the girls and I. We'll be over, every day or so. You won't be lonesome, after a while.'

He moved to the door and opened it, standing there a moment. 'Get somebody with some fun in 'em to stay with you. And don't sit out here in the sticks and mope. You gave 'em several years of your life—you've got nothin' to regret.'

He turned and went to the head of the stairs. In the hall below, Evan, smiling enigmatically, was groping his way into the hall to somewhere in the rear of the house. Ransome stopped and looked down at him for a moment and shook his head in sympathy. He started to go down, but some impulse not quite clear to himself kept him poised there with one foot on the first step until Evan had gone into the library. Then he went down slowly and with something furtive in his movements, as though he felt that in what he had said to Isabel he had in some indefinable way done Evan an injury.

Isabel stood watching him a moment. Then she closed the door and went slowly across her room. She lay on the bed, face down, as she had once before years ago when she dreamed of marrying Evan or Jonah and becoming mistress of Riverridge. Then she had clapped her heels together and her dreams had been girlish, romantic ones. Now she pulled a pillow under her breast, and lay, with her chin in her hands, gazing out over Jennifer's garden towards The Chimneys. There was no happiness in her face, thinner now and more mature, but there was a definite determination.

Suddenly, having come to some decision, she smiled and moved off the bed. She began to undo the buttons at her wrist at which she had been fumbling, in such a different mood, when Ransome had knocked at her door. She took off the sheer black dress, pinned her fair hair higher on her head, and, lying down again with an expression of deep satisfaction, began to plan her future.

Downstairs Ransome was talking to Evan, one arm around Dorothy, who had driven over to fetch him home. Neither he

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nor Isabel was thinking directly of each other, yet their moods had changed completely since they had been alone for that few minutes in her room. And neither knew that from across the hall Jonah had watched Ransome leave Isabel's room, watched with black eyes burning in a pale and disapproving face. In these few moments the fate of all of them at Riverridge had been decided.

The next day Isabel sent to town for her friend, Milly Hastings. Milly was fifty-ish, a widow and coy. Her coyness was often boring, but her reputation was irreproachable, and her income was well-nigh non-existent, making it essential that she be agreeable and adaptable under various circumstances. She was accustomed to staying with the bereaved, with children whose parents took long trips without them, or with elderly people whose children wished to go on vacations too strenuous for their parents. She seldom actually took a salary for these services, but weeks and months out of the year she lived in comfort, and if she was tendered any sort of gift, she showed such sincere and touching gratitude that the giver was flattered and resolved to do even better next time.

At Riverridge in the next few months she positively bloomed. The old house, with its atmosphere of accustomed richness, kept her in a state of incessant ecstasy. In two weeks she had assumed the character of a great lady of leisure and acted as joint hostess to all comers with an air of assurance which annoyed Dorothy and amused Isabel, who knew that she could oust her at any moment in which she overstepped her privileges.

One of her attitudes which afforded Isabel the most entertainment was her determined and not at all subtle pursuit of Ransome Parks. She must have been six or seven years older than Ran, but she had a faded girlishness which was obviously more deceiving to herself than to anyone else. Her fair hair, which was fast turning grey, she wore in a mass of tiny curls and ornamented with flowers or bows or bright combs, like a jackdaw's

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nest. She had pink cheeks—or made them so—blue eyes which she could round like an innocent kitten's, and a withered rosebud mouth which she puckered easily in sympathy or amusement.

Her first attitude towards Ran was one of solicitation, and when she saw that his grief for Lucile was not going to crush him much longer, she changed to an attempt to divert him to herself. It was like watching a small, alluring animal cavort seductively, Isabel thought, to see her hang upon Ransome's slightest word, to hear her sighs, her exclamations, and her coos of understanding. She played cards with him by the hour in the evening, listening to his instructions and advice with apparent humility, though she was really a far better player than the forthright and clumsy Ran would ever be. She went riding with him, a tiny frightened figure on a huge horse, shuddering inwardly whenever the beast snorted or tossed its head. She walked with him in the garden and she made every possible gesture to ingratiate herself with his children.

Little Ran found her too fragile for his taste and the two girls openly disliked her. Letha and the other servants had by sly and devious references let Dorothy know that Milly had an ambition to become their stepmother and mistress of Riverridge. Mourning their mother as intensely as both girls did, they resented this bitterly. Their dislike crystallized into a silent but determined battle to defeat her. They set out to keep Ran from Riverridge as much as possible, and because they were not experienced enough to know better tried to poison his mind against Milly and her coy advances. But they were utterly incapable of competing with Milly's wiles, and before many weeks had passed, Ran had been convinced that both girls were being dramatically jealous, that his own freedom was being infringed upon, and that life at Riverridge, with Milly's hovering and Isabel's cool efficiency, was much pleasanter than the emotional strain at The Chimneys.

In the autumn he sent Lutie off to boarding-school, hoping that away from Dorothy's resentment she might become once more a normally happy little girl.

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Jonah had packed his clothes and most of his belongings and moved to town on the first of September. The family group at Riverridge had changed almost completely since Isabel had come there. There was no one but Evan, and he had only been a summer resident before. Dorothy on her visits there had the feeling that she was an outsider, that the house and a certain atmosphere which had always surrounded it had gone out of her life altogether. She spoke once to Ran of moving over to Riverridge, but he seemed so opposed to it, so hurt that she did not like the home he had provided for her, that she had not opened the subject again.

But Dorothy was not blind to the fact that Ran himself spent more and more time there, that he found the company of the older women more enjoyable. A bitterness grew in her which engendered a recklessness, and before that next winter was over Dorothy had made for herself a way of living, an escape into a false concern with social gaiety, which was to shape the pattern of her immediate future.

Peggy Little continued her visits to Riverridge. She liked Milly and ignored Isabel and she made herself more and more indispensable to Evan. She and Isabel vied with entertaining him, but as Isabel's activities were necessarily curtailed both by her responsibilities and by her period of mourning, she found herself hard-pressed for diverting gossip. She made an amusing serial of Milly's pursuit of Ran, giving Evan a day-by-day account of Milly's progress or lack of it.

But this had definite limitations as a means of keeping up the interest between them. She dared not let him make his old, casual love to her, now that she was committed to a course of action which excluded him. For his groping fingers on her face or on the thick masses of her hair, his accidental touch against her breast or a casual arm about her shoulders, still thrilled her with a sudden sweet weakness.

Sometimes she wished that he would go away, that he would turn against her, or even that he would marry Peggy Little—

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anything to end this torment, this agonizing possibility, that kept alive in her an irresolution she despised.

Ran came over one night and reported that he had narrowly missed being killed by a heavy, ice-laden branch. Isabel stared at him aghast. If he had been killed, the house would have changed hands again—would be out of her reach forever. Catching Ran's flattered eye upon her—for she was white as he told of his escape—she coloured and looked away from him, feeling a startled response to the man's magnetism. From out of a dim night in the past she suddenly heard him say, '*By God . . . I'd like to have a partner like you!*'

'*Strange how our wishes sometimes come to pass!*' she thought, with dry humour, and moved out of the firelight to her favourite chair.

She sat and watched Milly flirting with Ran and listened to their conversation idly while her mind played with the picture of herself as the re-established mistress of the house. With Ran's money she could live as she pleased. He was making more every day and he was the sort of man who would relish his wife's displaying it. Poor Lucile would never have gratified him now, Isabel thought. He could have hung her with diamonds from head to foot and she would always have looked subdued.

Ran was telling Milly that Lutie would not be home for Christmas.

'It would be too hard on the kid,' he said, pouting his lips under his crisp gold moustache. 'One of the little girls at school—only child—wanted to take her home and Lutie wanted to go. By next year she'll feel differently.'

Milly went into a coo of sympathy and enlarged on how unfortunate it was that there was no woman at The Chimneys to make a home for the dear girls. Evan, sitting next to Isabel and smoking contentedly, moved a foot and nudged hers, grinning.

Jonah came back before Christmas. Every room held heart-break for him, and although Dorothy tried to include him in her

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circle of friends, he found them callow and silly, too gay for his muted thoughts of Jennifer and his grandfather. Milly irritated him; he missed Lutie and was sensitive to the tension between Evan and Isabel.

On Christmas Eve they decorated the Tree. In the past this had been one of the pleasantest ceremonies of the year. Tonight Jonah sat with Evan, who was, of course, helpless at such work, and Fount and Milly decorated it under Isabel's directions. Jonah noticed that she had disposed of the old familiar decorations of his childhood, the little wax angel with the asinine, turned-up nose, the battered star, the quaint Santa Clauses and figures of animals and birds which John and Jennifer had brought from abroad in the early years of their marriage. Everything on Isabel's tree was bright and new and shiny, and what had been a dear ceremony in the past, with each piece of decoration holding a dozen familiar associations, became under her hands merely an efficient rendering of another household task.

Later Fount brought them eggnogs before the library fire and they talked with a desperate attempt at gaiety. But Jonah was sad, Milly sleepy and bored without Ran, and Evan was lost in some dream of his own and sat grinning at the fire-light.

'We should have Ran here to play for us,' said Milly, patting at a rim of cream on her upper lip. 'It's just the night for a sing—the carols, you know.'

'“God rest us merry, gentlemen,”' said Jonah, with sudden irony. 'And good advice that is. I shall rest me, for one——It's after ten, and the house will be as cold as a vault as soon as the fires die down. Coming, Evan?' he asked, rising, but Evan shook his head.

'How goes the book?' asked Isabel, thinking that Jonah felt neglected, and a little ashamed that she had made no effort to entertain him.

'Slow but sure,' he answered, his mood changing instantly.

'*He loves it, as if it were his wife or child,*' she thought.

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He said, stretching sleepily, 'It's quite a stack now—just a rough draft, of course. Well, good night, and a Merry Christmas!'

They echoed the words, and then Milly, shivering a little, said: 'I think Jonah's got more sense than the rest of us. I'm going up, too. Why don't you, Isabel? You've been on the go all day; you look tuckered out.'

'Yes—I will,' said Isabel, rising. But Evan caught her by the wrist and said sharply, 'Don't leave me! I want to talk to you about something——'

He paused and turned his head as if listening for Milly's departure while Isabel struggled in vain to release her wrist from his grasp. Milly, after watching them a moment uncertainly, turned and with an embarrassed expression hurried into the hall.

'What do you want?' Isabel asked harshly. He had let go of her wrist and she was rubbing it resentfully. She had not wanted to stay. Every time she let him make love to her, she regretted it afterwards, not because she felt guilty about it, but because she could not tell whether he was serious or whether he was simply amusing himself at her expense. And each time she let him kiss her, it was harder to put him away from her, harder to teach herself to ignore him.

'What a lovely Christmas spirit you have!' he mocked, feeling for his pipe. He struck the match, sucked in and sat back, smoking contentedly. 'I ask you to stay and talk to me awhile on Christmas Eve and you jump down my throat.'

'I'm tired,' she said shortly, and stood in front of the fire, looking down at it.

'I wish I could see you,' he said wistfully, and her heart melted, remembering his blindness. She moved unhappily and went and sat opposite him. But she could say nothing for fear that if she relented he would make love to her or mock her—or both—and she was too tired to count on her self-control.

'*I shouldn't have stayed,*' she thought miserably. '*I should never be alone with him. I can't trust him—or myself.*'

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He said suddenly, 'I wanted to tell you first—I can see a little.'

She sprang up and went to him, sitting on a footstool near him.

'No! How wonderful! When did you know?'

He was touched by her sympathy. He smiled and put a hand on her shoulder.

'This morning. I can only tell light from dark yet—but they say it means that the nerves are mending. It may even mean that I can get about alone some day—be independent.'

'Poor Evan!' she said, her voice thick with tears.

'It hasn't been so bad,' he said cheerfully. He rose, leaning on her shoulder so that she winced with the pain, yet liked being pained by him, thinking how he had suffered and said nothing.

'I've had so much entertainment—I've had some black moments, I'll admit, but I've been lavishly spoiled, thanks to you'—he bowed—'and Peggy, and the rest. There was another thing I wanted to tell you——'

A chill of presentiment went through her as he paused. He knocked his pipe against the mantel and put it in his pocket. She had the feeling that he was preparing an exit. She tried to speak, but couldn't. Somehow she knew before he uttered the words what he was going to say, and the coldness of the room seemed to creep up on her like an icy tide. She dared not look up at him. She did not know how much he could see—whether or not he might by chance read her face.

'I've asked Peggy to marry me. We're going to be married right away—tomorrow, in fact.'

She felt herself spinning around and around and clutched the arms of her chair desperately. '*This*,' she thought, '*is like a death. You know it's coming, but when it comes it's so much worse than you thought. Until it comes, you keep hoping. And then there is no hope—and everything is over.*'

When she could speak, she said, 'Why did you tell me?'

She hoped that he would say something to take away part of this bitter pain she was feeling. She hoped that he would intimate that she was nearest to him, that perhaps if it had not been for her

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marriage to his grandfather he might have asked her instead. She did not quite know what she hoped he would say, but certainly something in the way of a tender farewell.

'Well, after all—we're leaving at daybreak. I've asked Fount to pack my bags tonight. I thought you were due some explanation. I won't be here for dinner.'

She had the wildest inclination to laugh—to *scream* with laughter.

'*There ought to be a ballad about it*', she thought wildly.

*'I've kissed you and hugged you, my sweet little sinner,
But tomorrow I marry and I won't be home to dinner.'*

Something like that.' It was monstrous. It was unspeakable! But it was just like Evan. If she had needed something to cure her of her madness, this was it. He had supplied the cure himself.

She stood up. She felt light and strangely relieved as though she had been carrying some burden which, though it had been precious, had been too weighty. She was free now, free of her old furtive unhappiness, free of her weakness. She was strong again.

'It seems a little sudden,' she said, smoothing her dress. 'I'm surprised Peggy didn't want a formal wedding—all the trimmings.'

'She says she'll take me any way I come,' he answered, grinning, and she thought furiously how conceited he was for all his charm. 'Estes is going abroad and they need me in the office. I've promised to go back by the first of the year. I'm anxious to see how much I can do with these blinkers.'

'So you're leaving—leaving the South.' She felt again the little sickening stab of pain she had when he had told her about his proposal. (Not entirely free—but nearly so.) 'I hope you've enjoyed your stay,' she added, with irrepressible bitterness.

He reached for her, drew her to him and said, kissing her on her cheek: 'You've been wonderful. I'll never forget it as long as I live. I hate to go—really I do—but I can't be a house-cat all my life. We'll be back—just as I always have. And you'll be

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right here—you'll just stay here and Ran'll move in and he'll marry you and he'll make so much money you won't know whether your friends are friends or bootlickers—but you'll be happy.'

'Which is more than you will ever be!' she retorted, furiously pulling away from him. He was never happy unless he was spoiling something, she thought unjustly. 'Good night! I wish Peggy the joy of you!'

She hurried from the room and up the stairs, stumbling a little and furious to find her eyes full of tears.

In the library, Evan stood with bowed head, holding his hands to the warmth of the dying fire. His face was sober and a little pale. He was thinking that he had at last got out of it, and neatly, too. He'd made her so angry that she would no longer care. She would not regret his love-making now, those sweet, stolen kisses over the past five years. She'd do as he had said, marry Ransome Parks and go on enjoying her possessions.

He shivered a little in the coldness of the room, and then, turning out the lamps—for he knew she had not done so—he groped his way into the hall. At the console table he felt among the glasses, poured himself a large drink of straight whiskey. The winter chill, which all of Fount's persistent energy could not quite rout, was seeping into him. He'd take the drink to his room and drink it just as he got into bed and the penetrating warmth would put him to sleep. He thought of Peggy and went up the wide stairs smiling, the whiskey held carefully in one hand.

Jonah, in his room, was reading, his shoulders wrapped in a disreputable old bathrobe, his black hair brushed up on end against the pillows piled behind him. Evan opened the door and stuck his head in, listening.

'You awake? What you doing?' he asked.

'Reading. Come on in. Watch out for that chair. Come and sit by my fire, if you want.'

'No. I've got me a toddy and I'm on my way to bye-bye. Just stopped to tell you the news.'

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'News?'

'I'm getting married——' Jonah, thinking of Isabel, felt his heart lurch. His grandfather had only been dead a few months.

'... tomorrow,' Evan ended. 'Peggy Little. We're going to New York. I'm going back to work. Thought I'd say good-bye.'

Jonah felt a great sigh of relief go out of him. He didn't know why he had dreaded to hear Evan say Isabel's name instead. Certainly he didn't want to marry her himself, so if Evan did there was no reason for him to care. It was simply that the thought of his grandfather's wife marrying anybody else was distasteful to him. And yet he knew that he could not hope that a woman as pretty and as ambitious as Isabel would stay single out of respect for a man she could hardly have appreciated.

* 'So—it's Peggy!' he exclaimed. 'Well, congratulations—she's a beauty all right and a grand girl.' He stumbled over the last words, and Evan, grinning again, said: 'Oh, yes. I almost forgot. Her beauty will mean something to me—I hope. They told me today—they think I may see again soon.'

'Oh! Evan, that's the best news yet! Gee, old man, I'm glad of that! Does Isabel know—I mean about your marrying, too?'

'Yes. I told her just awhile ago. She seemed to think Peggy was getting a bad bargain.'

Jonah made some embarrassed murmur, and Evan said: 'Oh, she's not interested in me any more. After all, I didn't inherit the house. It's a good thing you didn't either—you'd 'a' been married before this time come Michaelmas. What a woman! Well, I must move along. We're getting married very quietly right after early service in town and catching an early train. I would have asked you to be my best man, otherwise. I'll be seeing you from time to time, and when the book comes out, I suppose you'll be coming up to New York. Good night—and Merry Christmas!'

'The same to you,' said Jonah, but not heartily. Already his mind had raced away with Evan's news and his manner of telling it. He thought that his cousin's glibness probably hid some

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bitterness, and what he had said of Riverridge stayed in Jonah's mind like a bothersome gnat.

It was true that the house belonged to Ran. And Isabel was mistress of it. He could see as plainly as he saw the objects in his room how events would shape up now. She would simply be here and be kind to lonely, lusty Ran, and presently he would fall into her lap like a ripe pear—and Riverridge would be hers again. At least temporarily.

He wondered if Ran had ever made a will, leaving the place to the children. He thought guiltily that perhaps he should speak to him about it, but put the thought from him as unpleasant. Ran was much older than he and certainly competent and fair. He would think it presumptuous if Jonah brought up the subject.

He fell back on the bed and recalled that other day of shock—when his grandfather had told him that he expected to marry Isabel. He lay there thinking of the strangeness of families and of human relations and of how events had moved since first he had seen Isabel smiling under her tilted sailor hat.

He rose once and built up the fire and sat staring at it, but the act did not break the rambling train of his thought.

When Isabel married Ran and they set up housekeeping in this house which he loved—it would be the end, practically, of his family. He had already left, himself. The house, as his grandfather often said, lived on, but the family was gone: Lutie and little Ran, Dorothy, he, himself—they would move out, make new lives. There was nothing to hold them together. This was the end. He had thought that an era was ended with John's death. But this was another and bitterer end. The house would be polished and groomed, the gardens retain their lush perfection. The roses would thrive as well for any hands, indifferent to the years of love that Jennifer had lavished on them. The mimosas would bloom with innocent bland beauty for any man, not caring for Tremont's going. It was ironic to him that Isabel had sacrificed love for things which, when their owners died, lived hardily and

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insensitively on, uncaring. And suddenly, again, he longed for Lutie and her selfless affection.

Isabel waked nervous and restless. Her own thoughts and the loneliness of a solitary breakfast on Christmas morning were more than she could face. She suddenly felt that she wanted people about her, and when Jinny came in to wish her 'Christmas gif'! she sent word by her to the others to join her at breakfast in her sitting-room.

Dressing, she wished she were out of mourning and reluctantly laid aside a cherry-red quilted jacket which she would like to have donned against the house's chill. Instead, she put on a black wool dress that accentuated the pale perfection of her face and the gold of her hair. Against it she pinned a sprig of holly berries, and sending Jinny from the room on some errand, surreptitiously reddened her lips. She thought with distaste that she would have to break the news of Evan's marriage to the others. She was trying to think how she would do this as she descended the stairs to find Fount setting a small table before the blazing fire. She was relieved to see Milly there ahead of her. Both Milly and Jonah bearing gifts made a brave attempt to be festive, calling, 'Merry Christmas!' 'Christmas gift!' 'Merry Christmas!' to the household in general.

Jonah, to Isabel's relief, had already told Milly about the wedding and reduced her to a state of sentimental excitement which took all the responsibility of making conversation off Isabel.

They ate grits and lamb kidneys and hot corn muffins, coffee with cream so thick it wouldn't pour, and red plum jelly. Fount, beaming in the spirit of the occasion, popped in and out with dishes and bits of news from the lower regions, like—'Delia say dat de fattes' tukkey we's had sence she been hyere—tinder, too!' or, 'M's Robinsin jes' sent 'roun' a gallon o' dat musky-dime wine an' say ter wish you all Christmas gif'!

Jonah, enjoying the firelight on the freshly papered walls of the room, the savoury food, and the sense of bright snugness which the

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grey skies outside enhanced, tried to still the tiny thread of misery that drew through his heart at each reminder of Jennifer and John, of Lucile and Lutie. He thought again of Lutie on this strange Christmas morning, the first of her life away from home. A vision of her thinning little-girl face, framed in its soft rolls of brown hair, the wide, candid eyes and the sensitive mouth and chin, came to him and he felt an almost unbearable hunger for her.

Later, in the upstairs hall, Isabel paused by Evan's door, half-expecting to see him lying in bed, his ruddy hair ruffled, the covers drawn to his chin, curled like a boy in deep and easy sleep.

The sight of the empty bed, still holding the shape of his lithe young body, filled her with such vivid longing as she had not thought herself capable of. Like a dash of icy water in her face, it came to her as a shock that he was gone—he was *gone*! perhaps forever, and certainly never to return the same again. She wondered if in spite of her resolutions he would always have the power to hurt her.

She went into her own room and fell across the bed, fighting her desire to cry. But at last she rose and bathed her face, feeling spent and somehow lost and dissatisfied. This was the last time she would grieve and wait for Evan, she told herself. He was gone now, lost to her forever, and she must shut her mind to him and keep it shut.

Four hours later they were at dinner, a gayer and less awkward meal than Jonah had thought it could be. Isabel, looking flushed and beautiful, was bent on erasing from her mind any tinge of her morning's grief. She pulled crackers with little Ran and wore at a rakish angle the blue paper hat he drew from hers. She let Ran kiss her under the mistletoe, after he had kissed the fluttery Milly, and she drank a toast to their future, her eyes dry and determined. This was not all she had drunk, Jonah suspected, for she was noisier than he ever remembered her and she and Milly went into hilarious gales about nothing.

Fount had just come in with the pudding, a blaze of glory, when they heard steps pounding on the porch. The door was thrown

ISABEL

open, and Ben Little, looking like a character from Ye Olde English Christmas, burst into the room.

'Where are they?' he bellowed jocosely. 'Where are those rascals?'

He stood with his hat in his hand, looking waggishly about the room, his blue eyes dancing like stars in his ruddy face. 'Trot 'em out! All's forgiven! They think I didn't know what they were up to?'

Ran and Jonah had risen, and now Isabel stood up.

'You don't fool me,' Ben said, peering towards the pantry, where Fount with his mouth hanging wide open stared back. 'Where've you hid 'em? Bring 'em out—I want to kiss the bride!'

'You mean——' Ran with his napkin in his hand began to grin in what Isabel thought a fatuous, idiotic manner. 'You mean Evan and Peggy—you mean you didn't know they were getting married?'

'No, I didn't,' said Little, with a sudden sobering in his lips, though his eyes still danced. 'Ran off at daylight, the rascals! Knew they meant to do it—but not this way, damn 'em! I wanted to give Peg a wedding that'd be the talk of the county—— Say! You mean to tell me they ain't here? Well, Hell's floods! Where are they, then?'

'Half-way to New York by this time,' said Ran. 'You'd better sit down and have dinner with us. Here, Fount, bring us some champagne, we'll drink their health,' he added, turning to Ben Little, for whom Jonah had already placed a chair. 'We'll drink their health and then bring you a plate of dinner.'

It came as a slight shock to Jonah to see Ran take the keys of John Tremont's cellar from Isabel and hand them to the butler. It brought him sharply face to face again with the fact that the house was no longer his home. It belonged to Ransome Parks.

Little was fully sobered now, looking like a disappointed child.

'Why didn't they wait till after Christmas?' he asked plaintively. 'Shouldn't have left the old man alone at Christmas.'

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'They probably figured you'd come here and knew we'd have you to dinner with us,' said Milly. 'I think it was real cute of them. But why didn't you know sooner—didn't you miss 'em earlier?'

'Went out huntin' early this mornin' with Tom Carter and Bob—found this note when I came back.' He fumbled futilely for a moment and then gave up the search. 'Just said she'd gone out with Evan. Never thought they wouldn't be back for dinner. When they didn't, I figured they'd run off to get married——' He stopped a moment as Fount came in with a bottle and a tray of glasses. 'Well, damn my hide!' he exclaimed, 'They *eloped*, the rascals!'

The champagne compensated somewhat for his disappointment in not finding Peggy there and shortly he was almost his old, jovial self. They talked excitedly, and only Jonah knew that behind her glass Isabel had closed her eyes for a moment in white pain and that when she set the glass down the liquor was untouched.

When he left his grandfather's house that afternoon, it was almost dark. The sky seemed close over the snowy, shadowed fields and against it the darker branches of the leafless trees made a familiar, wistful pattern. The lights from the house fell across the snow as he had seen them all these years; the fine straight lines, the mighty columns, the broad, welcoming porches and doors, stood steadfast in the dusk, serene and sure.

He paused at the foot of the steps and turned up his collar, preparatory to walking the quarter of a mile to the new inter-urban streetcar line. He would on occasions come back to this house again, he would see these gardens once, maybe twice more in bloom. But never again would the place be home for him. All that had made it dear had gone from it. When he stepped out into the cold drifts on the driveway, he was like a swimmer, who courageously but not without misgivings, pushes out into the dark waters of an uncharted sea.

PART

3

JONAH AND DOROTHY

*. . . there is no possession more
sure than memory's—*

ROBINSON JEFFERS



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LUTIE lay face down on the edge of the bluff and watched the river running by below her. It was clear and shallow here, so that she could see the smooth brown pebbles which covered the bottom, the darting minnows and the awkward crayfish near the bank.

She had forgotten how terrified she used to be of the bluff when she was a small child, six or seven years ago. It did not look nearly so high, for one thing, or so far from the familiar security of the house. Now it had become a sanctuary to her, a refuge from the barbs and little disappointments which attacked her at home and at Riverridge. Only the bluff, the woods, and the road by the fields—those places where Isabel seldom if ever came—seemed free of the insidious poison spread by the usurper.

That feeling of unfriendliness which Isabel had sensed in Lutie when they had first seen each other remained. It had been strengthened in the imaginative mind of the child by the gossip of the servants and the deaths of the three people dearest to her. They were gone; they lay shut away in the dark, while Isabel, who did not deserve it, had all the things they had loved.

She lay awake night after night picturing Isabel as her step-mother, and because her jealousy and dislike of the woman were rooted in a deep and lonely love of both Jennifer and Lucile, and

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because she was a strange and quiet child who had few companions of her own, the unhappiness grew until it was intolerable.

Lutie never went to Riverridge except under compulsion. She sat in unhappy silence through interminable Sunday dinners, slipping away at the first opportunity with the funny papers or a book or to talk to old Pompey, now kept to a rocking-chair with rheumatism. Isabel, mistaking her silence for a milk-and-water indifference, paid practically no attention to her, but Milly, in an attempt to ingratiate herself with Ransome and to turn the girls against Isabel if possible, hovered over them both with infuriating mannerisms and unappreciated maternal gestures.

Since there were usually only the two women in the house there was a sense of vastness and emptiness in it which had never been there when Jennifer was alive. Lutie felt a haunting atmosphere about the place which, in spite of fresh paint, bright flowers and the smell of rich food, depressed her and made her all the more lonely.

At The Chimneys the situation was almost as bad. Ransome Parks, making money out of everything he laid his hands on, was becoming more and more involved in business. He was away from home for days at a time, and because Lutie was, too, at camps and schools, he sometimes forgot he had a middle child. Little Ran stayed at Riverridge more than he did at his own home so that The Chimneys was practically run by Letha and entirely to suit her adored young mistress, Dorothy. Lutie moved about it like a small ghost, gleaning a vicarious pleasure from seeing Dorothy try on new dresses, hearing the music she and her companions banged out on the piano, and nibbling at the boxes of chocolates and reading the novels with which Dorothy's numerous admirers kept her supplied.

Dorothy was kind to her when she remembered to be, but the older girl had already begun to enjoy a purely social life before Lucile's death. It was natural that, when things grew unpleasant or baffling at home, she should turn more and more to those friends and activities she enjoyed and which helped her to forget.

JONAH AND DOROTHY

Loving and desiring homage, Dorothy was reacting in her own way to that feeling of a loss of domestic security which she felt but could not define.

To Lutie she was the epitome of everything that was lovely and romantic, everything that a little thirteen-year-old girl dreamed of being. No summer camp with other pigtailed 'teen-agers, campfire suppers or barracks bedtime giggles, could make up to Lutie, who cared little for companionship in the mass, for being away from Dorothy all summer. Dorothy lent an atmosphere like perfume to every homely scene and act, and no matter where she was Lutie had a sense of her presence—fragrant, gay, and beautiful, like the memories of Christmas and Easter—always in the depths of her mind to which to turn.

Dorothy was almost unaware of this complete and unselfish adoration. Occasionally catching sight of the flushed and ecstatic face in her own mirror, she would smile radiantly at the younger girl and make some gesture of affection or generosity. But usually she accepted it as she did the luxury of The Chimneys, the warmth of the sun and of open fires, the devastation of her numerous suitors, and Letha's unstinted devotion. She had never known anything else than to be loved, to laugh and to be made comfortable. It was difficult for Dorothy to picture discomfort, to picture, for instance, Isabel ruling the house in which she lived. And, anyway, she always thought with a shrug, she could marry and get away from it all, any day—just any day!

On the bluff, Lutie rolled over and gazed at the hot summer sky. She saw that it was late in the morning and probably time for Dorothy to be awake. She rose and went slowly down the hill, skirting her grandmother's garden, which was now often neglected, for Isabel preferred hothouse flowers and Ransome Parks was more than glad to buy them for her. Along the clay road by the river fields, past the long log fence on which John Tremont had so often leaned in rich contentment, and through the last curved strip of woods to The Chimneys, she went, feeling the sun hot on her shining hair, the earth cool beneath her sandalled feet.

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Letha was in the kitchen singing. Fixing Dorothy's breakfast, no doubt, thought the younger girl with no trace of jealousy. It was natural to like to wait on Dorothy; she was so sweet and full of gentle laughter, so surrounded with glamour and loveliness.

Lutie climbed the stairs with the same anticipatory thrill that one enters the theatre for a *matinée*.

In his office overlooking the capital's main business street, Ransome Parks stood staring out of the window. Usually he was interested in the number and types of cars which passed and who was driving them, but today he had a hard time keeping his mind away from Riverridge.

There were several things to which he should have been giving his attention. There was the series of newspaper advertisements he and young Jim Rogers had been planning, a campaign to convince women drivers that a 'gasoline buggy' was no more dangerous than old Dobbin and was much more practical than the electrics they now drove, the batteries of which were constantly having to be recharged at inconvenient periods.

There was that shipment of tyres from Ohio, delayed over a week now by the floods, and which might lose him a big order if he could not get them in time. And there was that foreign jack-anapes that Dorothy had taken to running around with whose antecedents he had meant to look up that morning.

Instead, he had merely fumbled around with the papers on his desk, chewed his cigar, strolled across the street to the hotel, had a beer, and come back to dictate a few brief letters to Miss Purse, a prim young woman with an obviously false 'switch' and black paper cuffs over her white blouse sleeves.

She was typing in the next room now. As he stood spraddled in front of the window, she occasionally glanced up at him with timid admiration. He was a big man in his middle forties, and still not too fat. His reddish-blond hair and crisp, short moustache were thick and had a tendency to wave. His skin was clear and ruddy. When he laughed, his eyes blazed and he threw back his

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head showing a set of perfect teeth. Women liked him at once because he had cultivated an air of deference which made each one feel that she had not only his complete attention, but that she would forever after hold a special place in his memory. The good-natured charm and easy flattery which he had lavished on Jennifer with such felicitous returns had become a habit with him. He found it cost him nothing and made him innumerable friends.

Men liked him because, while he was shrewd and could not be duped, he was a generous competitor, strictly honest, and one who, probably because life had been so good to him, held no grudges. He was lucky, too, making money with a Midas touch out of anything in which he invested, and liked to have irons in several fires. He radiated a feeling of well-being that was infectious and assuring.

Business, however, was not foremost in his mind this morning. He was seeing, instead of the cobblestones and dusty sidewalks beneath his window, moonlight over Riverridge and Isabel on the shadow-dappled porch rocking gently so that the dark fingers of the mimosa leaves seemed to slip back and forth over her in soft caress. He was remembering the faint fragrance of her perfume, which had come to him now and again over the scent of the roses, the sound of her voice, grown softer through these years of living in the South, and of the almost unbearable sense of her physical presence, there in the soft summer night. He had been consumed with the desire to take her in his arms, and only the proximity of the twittering Milly had kept him from giving way to his desire. Tonight, he told himself, biting strongly on his cigar, he'd get Isabel away, he'd take her somewhere where he could hold her and, after these tedious months of restraint, feel her lips against his own.

The hunger had been growing within him for weeks, and now with the balmy loveliness of summer he felt it rising in him like a winy sap—the yearning to have her, never to let her go.

He knew she was amenable to his love-making. He had seen it in her long and provocative glances, heard it in the indulgent

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laughter running like a warm flame along the most casual of her words to him. She had not resented or rebuffed his caresses, which had grown since Tremont's death from those of facile sympathy to tentative love-making. The time was ripe—he could be put off no longer. He began to pace the office in his excitement, thinking what a couple they would make together, he who was called affectionately 'Handsome' Parks and she who had struck better men than himself dumb with her pale gold beauty.

'I'll get a ring!' he thought, delighted with the idea, and to the astonishment of Miss Purse, grabbed his hat and without a word to her dashed out of the office.

She got up from her typewriter and went to the window watching him stride up the street. After a moment she shook her head and went back to her desk, where she took out a copy of *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* and began to read it absorbedly.

At dinner that night Ransome was so genial and hearty that both Dorothy and Lutie were amused at him without suspecting the cause. He was always pleasant, usually had a cordial word for the girls and was hopelessly indulgent. But at meals—although he demanded ample and good ones—he was inclined to be abstract and impersonal, his thoughts obviously on some problem which he considered far from their feminine interests.

Tonight, however, he was full of stories and jokes, complimented Dorothy on her dress, teased her about her beaux, and offered to buy Lutie a pony.

Dorothy, concerned with her own evening's entertainment, was indifferent to what he did after the meal, but Lutie, who had been feeling a nostalgic misery for her mother and grandmother all that day, hung about and watched him set off towards Riverridge with sullen resentment. He had not—as he sometimes did when he sensed her loneliness—suggested that she walk over with him. In fact, he had been suddenly so abstracted that he had not heard her muttered good-bye.

It was a lovely summer night full of the sounds and scents that

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always linger wishfully in the memory. Lutie stood on the porch watching her father as he strode off vigorously in the dusk. Then she went over to the porch swing and curled up on its well-padded seat.

All the little miseries of her life seemed to gather and break over her in a wave, to tear out of her every ounce of self-control. The aloofness she practised before others melted there in the sweetly whispering night. With her hot face pressed into the pillows to stifle the sobs, Lutie cried her heart out with loneliness and inarticulate longing. Long afterwards, sore and feeling stripped of all emotion, she lay back, letting the cool night air touch her face like the caresses she hungered for and at last fell into a tremulous sleep.

At Riverridge, Ransome Parks walked through the woods and through Jennifer's old garden, remembering her as the scent of the late honeysuckle came to him on the warm night air. He thought how strange it was that he should be coming here to court Jennifer's husband's second wife! He grinned wryly, wondering what the old lady would have thought of it, thinking of her with tenderness and admiration. There was something in Isabel, perhaps, that was a little like her—an independence, a way of hewing to the centre of things and taking a practical view of them.

The house was brilliantly lighted as usual. He could see Milly standing in the living-room fiddling with the flowers, and he wondered how he would get Isabel away from her.

Moving quietly across the thick grass, he tiptoed up the steps and stood on the porch looking in. He could see Isabel nowhere and was so startled that he uttered an ejaculation when she touched him on the arm and said teasingly, in a whisper, 'Dear me! Don't tell me that you are so fascinated by Milly that you must come and stare at her in secret!'

'Shut up!' he answered between exasperation and laughter. 'You know darned well who I came to stare at. I was just trying to see if I could catch your eye and lure you outside without that coy dragon coming with you. I wondered where you were.'

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He had caught her by the arm, and now he moved her firmly before him so that they went down the steps together. Their shoulders touched, he could feel the weight of her against him and sense the smothered amusement she felt at their slipping off this way from Milly.

Under the dark trees he tucked her hand firmly within his arm and they began to pace back and forth.

She was wearing an old dress of some pale material that had a full skirt and a low neck. Her hair shone in the patches of dim light that sifted between the leaves and she looked at him under dark brows with a vibrancy and animation that excited him.

'God, Bella, I've been thinking of you all day!' he said hungrily. 'I—I just can't stand it any longer.'

He stopped and stood before her, looking at her. He was taller than she, and she looked up, waiting, her lips parted as if in amusement. 'You know I'm mad about you!' he said, and took her in his arms.

Not so much in thought as in sensation she recognized him as a more suitable mate than any other she had encountered. None of the men who had made sheep's eyes at her since Tremont's death could touch him for vigour or charm. Evan's kisses had been calculated and suavely experienced. John's love-making—what there had been of it—had been polite conventionality. But Ran's had a maturity of emotion that burned into her, leaving her weak and radiant even while one part of her mind analysed it.

Suddenly she yielded and relaxed in his arms, letting him kiss her passionately until, like a man whose terrible thirst is momentarily assuaged, he paused and put his hands on her hair, saying huskily, 'Your hair—I've always wanted to have it in my hands.' She only laughed a little and he said, 'When will you marry me?' adding with a strange shyness that touched her, 'You will, won't you? Look—I hoped you'd say yes. I wanted to *think* you'd say yes, anyway—so I got this this afternoon—it reminded me of you.'

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out the ring. Opening

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the box and throwing it away, he moved a little into the light from the house.

She came and stood by him staring at it, and he said, 'Like it?'

'Ran!' she said breathlessly. 'It's wonderful—it's the most exquisite thing I ever saw!'

It was a pale sapphire cut like a diamond and set about with pearls. It sparkled and gleamed in the moonlight, and for a moment the two stood there looking down at it.

'Here,' he said, reaching for her hand. He slipped the ring on and pulled her to him, kissing her again.

Milly came on to the porch and called querulously, 'Isabel! Isabel! Where in the world are you?'

Ran pulled her back into the shadows, muttered, 'Damn!' and held her as if afraid she might go in and leave him.

Isabel said distinctly, 'I'm out here—my head aches. I'll be in presently; the gnats are bad.'

Ran gave her an appreciative squeeze and she whispered, 'She hates gnats! She's afraid they'll mar her complexion.'

Milly stood a moment peering into the darkness, but when Isabel made no further sound she turned and went reluctantly into the house. Her whole figure expressed suspicion and disapproval, and Isabel, laying her head against Ran's shoulder, sighed and said, 'Oh, gosh!' like an impatient child.

Ran laughed, his lips against her hair, thinking how enchanting such infrequent lapses from her usual dignity made her. When they were married, she need never be anything but natural with him—he'd know her then thoroughly and comfortably. He thought of the Biblical meaning of 'knowing' one's wife and thought, 'These old birds didn't miss much.'

And Isabel Page felt a tremendous satisfaction that at long last she had come into these things for which she had so passionately yearned—wealth, position, security, and a partner who was her match for shrewdness, ambition, and a zest for living. She was happy with Ran as she had never been with Evan. That love, she thought, giving a swift backward glance, was always under a

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shadow—the shadow of her own disloyalty to John, of the gruelling uncertainty of Evan's reactions. That had been a fiery, furtive, and unhappy affair, while this was something she could flaunt with pride. She'd send him home early and flaunt it before Milly tonight! In spite of a slight feeling of pity for the older woman, she felt that she could not miss the opportunity to get back at her for all the petty inconveniences, the boring bits of advice, the ill-concealed envy and jealousy with which Milly had inflicted her this past two years.

Ran was exuberant and full of talk. They'd go on a long wedding trip, he said, Niagara Falls, the West, Bermuda—France—anywhere she named. They'd be gone a month, two months; he hadn't had a vacation in a coon's age. He'd leave the business in young Jim Rogers' hands and really relax.

He talked on, and Isabel, caught up by his enthusiasm, tried to push out of her mind what she would have to put up with from Milly once she had broken the news to her, what Dorothy and Lutie's reactions would be.

'We'll be married when? Next week—week after——?' He bent over her, rubbing his cheek against hers.

She felt a little panicky and shivered in the warm darkness, knowing again suddenly that Ran would not be satisfied with kisses or cool acquiescence. There would be no citadel unassailed in his love-making. She had held, in spite of her marriage, something cool and inviolate within her, and it would be completely destroyed by this tumultuous man. Isabel was unused to surrender, and when he put this question so abruptly she stammered like an inexperienced girl. Remembering her accustomed control, it flattered him to have flustered her so. He chuckled with self-satisfaction.

'Oh, n-no, Ran, no!' she had answered, pushing him away from her. 'Not until late fall, anyway!'

'Now don't tell me it will take you two or three months to get ready to be married,' he said. 'Don't pull that nothing-to-wear stuff on me. I'll take you without anything to wear—I'd like it,

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in fact!' he added, and laughed so that she put her hand across his mouth, fearing that Milly would hear them.

'Hush!' she said sharply, and he wondered if she had resented his saying that. He'd never thought of her as a prude—her discretion had always been calculated, he thought, rather than from any innate false modesty.

'Let's wait until Lutie goes back to school, anyway,' she was saying. 'She's going to take this hard—I've never been able to make her like me, you know. I think it will be easier for her—and consequently easier for us!—if we wait until she's back at school. You can write to her then and tell her about it in a way that may make her more willing to accept it. And she'll not feel it so vividly if she isn't here when it happens. She'll have her lessons and her amusements and her friends there—she'll be all right by the time she comes home at Christmas.'

He stood still a moment and she could imagine his lips under the gold moustache, pouting with disappointment. Then he said, with the sudden charm which made him so engaging, 'You think of everything, don't you, Bella? God! I'm a lucky man!'

When they parted an hour later, Isabel realized that they had not mentioned Dorothy, and it was Dorothy more than Lutie whose reaction she dreaded. She had put off the date of the wedding, not out of consideration for Lutie, whom she considered a morbid brat, but in the hope that before long Dorothy would have wedding plans of her own. In that case she would be too concerned with her own affairs to mind much what Ransome did. She must ask Ransome to keep their engagement a secret for a while and she would swear Milly to secrecy, too. Then perhaps things would work out as she had planned with no disagreeableness or upheaval. Things had a way of working out that way for her, she thought, smiling.

She stood on the steps a moment looking at the ring in the moonlight, turning the shapely hand, which Jennifer had once looked at so thoughtfully, so that the ring caught the light and

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blazed coldly. Still smiling, she turned and went indoors to meet Milly's curious and martyred gaze.

When Isabel had counted on keeping her plans secret from Dorothy, she had underestimated Ransome's exuberance. He was bursting with the news of her acceptance of him, and walking home along the river road he had, in an uncanny slip of his mind, the impulse to tell Lucile, forgetting for a moment that she was gone and that, if she had not been, he would have had nothing to tell her.

He had told Lucile things for so many years that the habit, now that he had something of importance to talk about, came back to him. It was true that she had never seemed to listen to him—she'd always had an anxious eye and ear upon the nursery. Money meant nothing to her, since she had never been in need of it. He doubted if she had ever given a thought to its source, so that he had mentioned his business and his financial achievements less and less to her. He had genuinely mourned her for months after her death, but this same lack of interest in the things he considered important made losing her less tragic to him.

Isabel, now, would be vitally concerned with the turning of every penny and able to discuss it with him intelligently. She had a natural, phenomenal gift for business. Witness how she'd run the farm! And, by Jove, if he didn't watch her, she'd be doing the turning for him! He thought of her again as she had been in his arms under the dark trees and hastily put from his mind a comparison of her beauty with Lucile's faded looks.

In the house he went straight to the icebox and rummaged, finding a cold drumstick, beer, and cheese. He got a box of crackers and spread the food out on the oilcloth of the kitchen table, letting his weight down into the chair with sensuous satisfaction.

His mind kept going back to his coming marriage and he could scarcely keep still. He wished there were someone he could talk to, and looked at the kitchen clock, wondering when Dorothy would be home.

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He knew nothing of the years in which Isabel had actually been in love with Evan. He only knew that her marriage to his father-in-law had been a fairly pallid and dispassionate affair.

'*Like dancing a minuet,*' he thought, and laughed into the foam on his glass of beer.

When he looked at the clock again, it lacked five minutes of midnight. He'd been sitting here longer than he realized, thinking of Isabel. By gad, she was worth thinking about, he thought happily, and got up, putting the remains of the food away.

He was still wide awake and full of himself. Where was Dorothy? He'd have to speak to her about getting in so late. There was no sense in it; seeing these striplings every night, she certainly didn't have to see them so long at a time. What in the devil did they find to talk about? Suddenly he remembered the way he had spent the hours at Riverridge and he flushed annoyed. He didn't like to think of Dorothy being made love to, possibly being married to one of those young jackanapes! She was nothing but a child—well, she was twenty or twenty-one at that—he couldn't remember. But he didn't care! He didn't care if she was of age, he'd tell her; as long as she lived under his roof she'd get home at a decent——

But maybe he'd better wait until he'd told her about Isabel. He didn't want to spoil that. He hoped she'd take it all right. He knew that Dorothy didn't really like Isabel, though for the life of him he couldn't see why. When Isabel had first come there, Dorothy'd been wild about her, you couldn't separate them. Then suddenly—he couldn't remember just when it had been, but after Tremont's marriage to her—Dorothy had cooled off. He guessed that it must have been simply that she had got over a schoolgirl infatuation. It needn't mean that she couldn't get along with Isabel now, just because she wasn't 'crushed' on her still. They were near enough of the same age—if they saw more of each other, perhaps they'd be good friends again.

He was haunted by the memory of Lucile, her anger at her father's marriage, and the uncomfortable thought of what she

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would think of this one. Perhaps other people would think badly of him, too. He expected some gossip—after all, there was bound to be about anybody who married Isabel Tremont. The fact that he was in the family would naturally make it worse. He hoped it wouldn't hurt his business, his popularity. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead and his face. It was warm and close in the kitchen and he was perspiring freely.

He shut his mind to the less fortunate side of his marriage and began to think of Isabel as his wife. His friends would welcome her, he felt sure. They'd see that she was just the woman for him. He'd buy her a string of sapphires, by gad, before he was through. He'd dress her like a queen. She'd outshine any woman, anywhere!

There was the sound of a car stopping in the front of the house, of several voices and muffled laughter. He felt a nervous pricking on the back of his hands as the moment to break his news to Dorothy became imminent. Perhaps he'd imagined all this coolness between Isabel and Dorothy—after all, Dorothy was thoughtless and so popular—their interests had diverged, that was all.

He heard her come in and called to her, standing in the middle of the kitchen.

She saw him there with surprise and said, 'Why, Daddy, what are you doing up?'

'You evidently don't think it's so late, young lady! What you find to do until all hours of the night, every night of the world, I cannot for the life of me see. You'll be a wreck before you are thirty.'

Dorothy glanced at the kitchen looking-glass and grinned.

'What have you been doing "until all hours"?' she asked coolly.

He smiled fatuously in spite of himself.

'What I've been doing I don't do every night, my dear! I've just been asking a young lady to marry me.'

For a moment there was a long silence in the kitchen. A last

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bit of water in the drain of the sink, where Ran had rinsed his glass, gurgled, and went out with a nauseous suck.

'Not Isabel?' asked Dorothy tonelessly.

'Why not?'

'You wouldn't *marry* her?'

'I was thinking of it. Any objections?'

She stood staring at him white-faced and with eyes so wide and dark they irritated him. He wanted to shout at her, to tell her that Isabel was worth ten of any other woman; that he could remember when Dorothy herself had thought her perfect. He wanted to shout that it was none of her business whom he married; that he'd had enough of loneliness and of trying to be a mother to two girls; that Isabel was already as good a mother to little Ran, and that, after all, he loved her! He wanted to yell at her to come off her high horse; that she had not thought enough of him to stop gallivanting around all she pleased; and that now she could let him manage his own affairs without putting on a martyr act. He wanted to do a number of things, most of them out of hurt and confusion because of the still, dark look she had fastened on him; but he was afraid to. He was afraid that if they quarrelled now, not only would it mean a coldness between them for the rest of their lives (for he would never, as Tremont had done to Lucile, come and beg her to accept his wife), but that any break within the family would give rise to more gossip and speculation outside than his position and business could stand. Quickly he sought some way to approach her.

He bit his lips and looked at the floor and said with studied pathos: 'I thought you'd like me to be happy—again. It's been kind o' lonesome for your old Dad with you busy with all your affairs. Not that I don't want you to be. I want you to have everything that any young girl possibly could have.' He sat down and drew her on to his knee, where she sat rigidly. 'That's why I've worked so hard all these years . . . from the minute you were born I knew you'd be beautiful. I wanted to surround you with everything to keep you that way. Oh, you would have had

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plenty no matter who your father'd been. But I wanted to give it to you. You were just like a big doll to me—you've been one of the greatest pleasures of my life. But, by George, I don't see much of you now!' He jiggled his knees so that she bounced on them as she had as a child.

She felt her chin quivering and the hot tears flooding her lids, and she blinked them back, swallowing the lump in her throat. She knew what he was doing to her—just as well as he did—and she was furious with him, but helpless under the spell of his sentimental charm.

'You're so pretty that these young fellows just don't let you stay home with your Daddy any more. Well—that's all right. One of 'em 'll be carrying you off one of these days. God!'—he stopped, moved to emotion by his own methods. 'I can't believe it! My little girl. Old enough to marry!' He kissed her, pulling her to him, and she hid her face against the breast of his white suit, smelling the tobacco and the fragrance of his shaving lotion, and the not unpleasant odour of his sweating body, alive, vital, and strong.

'Yes, sir. You'll be gone before I know it. And there won't be anybody here to look after me. That's why I need a wife, honey. I need someone to help me bring up little Ran. He needs somebody who can manage him, and I'm gone so much. And Lutie—Lutie needs a woman to look after her clothes, get her through that awkward age. Isabel's a grand housekeeper, you've seen that. She can do anything she sets her hand to. Why, she carried Riverridge right through these last bad years—made it pay and kept it in apple-pie order. It takes brains to do that—brains and backbone. Maybe you don't like her as much as you used to—but if you were together more'—he felt her stiffen slightly and hurried on—'you'd feel different, maybe. You've got your friends—you have a good time, don't you? Well, there's no reason why anything should be changed for you. We'll simply live at Riverridge, which is what your mother wanted you to do. Why, in a month you'll never know the difference.'

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She rose, hardly daring to trust her voice, her heart bursting, she felt, with the things she had to leave unsaid.

'When will you be married?'

'Next month. Isabel thought we should wait until Lutie was at school. She feels that Lutie doesn't like her, and she thought that once it was all over and Lutie had time to get used to the idea before she came home for the Christmas holidays—she'd feel better.'

'I don't. I think she'd feel that you were doing something sneaking. Lutie's old for her years. You won't fool her much. You'd better tell her and have the wedding before she leaves.'

Ransome pulled at his lower lip.

'Perhaps so. I'll tell Isabel. The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned.'

She turned to go, and he put his arm through hers, saying: 'Don't take it too hard, Dotty. You know yourself you'll marry before long. Don't grudge me a home, happiness.' He stopped to turn out the light and glanced at her, depressed by her pale unhappiness. There was a look in her face, the set of her mouth, that was unfathomable to him and that left him uneasy.

'I hope you'll be very happy,' she said thickly, and he felt his heart leap with relief. She was going to be a good sport about it. There would be no row—no gossip.

He kissed her smooth cheek. 'Good girl!' he said feelingly. 'You'll never regret it.'

'I hope you don't,' she said with discouraging bitterness. 'I hope Isabel isn't marrying you, as she did Grandfather—just for Riverridge.'

He stopped and stared at her aghast. They had reached the living-room now and she was climbing the stairs, looking back at him with a dark sardonic stare that had something disturbingly like Jennifer in her harder moods.

'Nonsense!' he cried. 'That was something entirely different. Something you couldn't have known anything about. You were just a young girl. *We love each other—*'

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She was gone, walking out of his sight into the dark shadows of the upstairs hall. He stood there fuming—frightened by the implication of her words. He rubbed his damp hands together and thought that, while she hadn't actually made a fuss, she had succeeded in completely spoiling his pleasure in the announcement, and in leaving him with the feeling that he didn't quite know what to expect of her. He glanced about the living-room bewilderedly.

The screen door opened and Lutie came in rumpled, red-eyed, and looking as if she'd been lost for days. He stared at her and cried, 'My God, another one! Where have *you* been this time of night?'

'I went to sleep on the porch,' she answered. Her voice was a monotone, hoarse and low. 'You woke me up shouting.' Her chin trembled, and she put a hand up to her eyes as if the light hurt them.

'She looks like Lucile,' he thought impatiently, and then, because he had been impatient, felt remorseful.

He went up to her and took her by the hand. 'It's time I got a woman around here to look after this family,' he said, trying to sound natural and unconcerned. 'You've caught a cold—you're as hoarse as a crow. Come on upstairs and get undressed. You're growing up like a gypsy!' he muttered, as he turned out the light and moved towards the stairs.

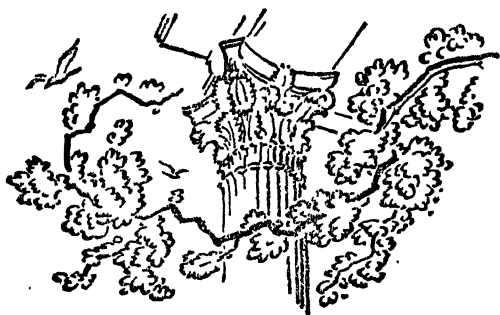
She did not answer, but she slipped her hand from his and went ahead of him. He heard her go into her room and shut the door. Somehow her silence hurt him more than Dorothy's bitter comments. He remembered what Isabel had said about her and sighed as he mounted the steps. He'd get her that pony first thing in the morning. Her room was beyond his and he did not go to her. He had had enough of emotion for one night and he was harassed by the gnat of doubt which Dorothy had set buzzing in his brain. Tomorrow he decided he'd tell Isabel that he had willed Riverridge to the girls and see how she took it. He'd find out then if she was just marrying him for the place. But as he

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undressed he remembered her kisses, the sweet weight of her body in his arms, her murmurous laughter—and he could not believe that she had meant none of it.

‘She’s just a practical woman,’ he told himself, getting into bed. ‘She’s just lucky that I happen to have what she wants and that I’m the man she wants with it.’

The words comforted him and he fell asleep almost at once with a smile on his lips, his ruddy face turned towards the window that overlooked Riverridge.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE next morning Ran breakfasted alone. His exultant mood of the night before had been completely dashed by Dorothy's reaction to his news, but any fear that she had implanted in his mind, fear that Isabel might be marrying him for Riverridge alone, was completely dissipated by his own egotism with the daylight.

He hung around the house for some time after he had eaten, hoping that Lutie would come down and that he could talk to her. He still felt remorseful about his feeling towards her the night before. It was bad enough to have felt impatience with her disconsolate mood, he thought, but to have admitted even to himself that he had disliked it most because it reminded him of Lucile's incessant sensitiveness was detestable. Lucile had been a good woman. She was dead now, and he was going to marry someone more to his own taste. The least he could do, he argued in his mind, was to be loyal to her memory and not to carry over any of his irritability to one of his children.

But Lutie, whether to avoid him, as he morosely suspected, or because her restless night on the porch had left her sleepier than usual, did not come downstairs and he would not go up. So presently, feeling hurt and disappointed, he left for town, making as much noise with his car as he could in the hope that at the last minute one of them would appear.

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He wondered how Isabel had fared when she broke the news to Milly. His own guilt at having, at one time or another, led the silly woman on with easy flattery and the exertion of his charm, did nothing to alleviate the weight of his gloomy mood.

Back at The Chimneys Dorothy lay and listened to the departing car in silent fury. She had awakened at daylight and stared at the treetops, red in the early sun, planning what she would do. By the time Ran left the house, her plans were so definite that she could hardly lie in bed in her eagerness to carry them out. As soon as the car was out of hearing, she got up and went to the head of the stairs and called Letha.

'Letha,' she said solemnly as the coloured girl came into her room, 'I'm going to leave home. I'm going to run off and get married.'

'No, you ain't!' cried Letha, grinning with excitement. 'You know you ain't! You ain't goner run off like white trash an' not have no weddin' an' no beautiful trousseaus ner nothin'! Why, it'd be a shame fer a bride as purty as you not to have de biggest weddin' in de county——'

'Oh, no!' cried Dorothy bitterly. 'Miss Isabel's going to have that—when she m-marries my father!'

Once the words were spoken, the event seemed irrevocable and imminent. Her chin trembled and her voice broke on a blurred wail. Only the stunned, excited, and incredible look on Letha's face gave her any satisfaction. It was something to be the bearer of such satisfactorily astonishing news.

'You ain't tellin' me dey raly goner git married? When? At de house? Um—hum! Dat'll be some big doin's. She goner show off, sho 'nuff—wid dat big house an' marryin' a man as rich as yo' pappy!'

'I won't be here to find out,' said Dorothy. 'I'm going to get married myself—and leave this place and never come back!'

Fury at the remembrance of all she had left unsaid to her father the night before swept over her, and she sobbed heart-brokenly as she fumbled at her lovely nightgown and tossed it

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on the floor. (Letha never reprimanded her for throwing her clothes around. The quicker they became soiled or rumpled, the sooner they were discarded and the sooner they became Letha's property. Letha herself had had three weddings not to be sniffed at for style and elegance, but she always managed to get rid of the husband before long and come back to The Chimneys.)

'You ain't goner run off dis mo'nin', is you?' she asked now. 'What I'm goner say to your pappy? And who you runnin' off wid?'

'No, I'm not going to run off this morning,' said Dorothy, 'but I have something I have to do.' She was dressing rapidly, while Letha, who usually waited on her every gesture, stood and stared, her hands wrapped in her apron or flourishing aimlessly in the air. Dorothy pulled on the fine white cotton stockings, and ruffled drawers and chemise, the long front-lace corset that encased her like an armour, and the embroidered corset-cover and ruffled petticoat. She sat at her dressing-table and began to brush her hair, staring at herself angrily in the glass as if she could by staring defy Isabel, triumphant at Riverridge, and Ran, uncomfortable but boyishly happy, at his office.

Letha moved forward and took the brush from her, arranging the massive and ridiculous build-up of rats and curls and braids which were the fashion.

'What you goner fly off dishaway fo'?' she asked. 'Miss Isabel ain't goner boss you, if she do marry yo' Pa. She ain't enuff older dan you fer dat. Cain't nobody boss you, nohow,' she added with pride.

'She'll think she can,' said Dorothy. 'She'll be the mistress of Riverridge—my own house! She'll run everything—what else could she do? She's been running the place for years! I'm sure I don't want to myself, but I'm certainly not going to sit around there and have her telling Father what I can do and can't do. I'm just as old as she is—or almost. I'm older than she was when she married Grandad, and I'll just get married and have my own home—you see.'

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'You sho kin,' said Letha, with the soothing flattery characteristic of her race. 'You kin take yo' pick, too. Which one you lak de bes', honey?' she asked. 'Dat nice Mr. Rodes, or dat handsome gemmun fum Muffreesber? He de one I favour—he so smooth an' mannersome an' he sho brangs you de fines' candy I ever did eat.'

Dorothy laughed, in spite of the fact that she felt washed out and sore, as if she had been crying all night. She looked at her flushed face in the glass with pleasure, remembering what the gentleman from Murfreesboro had said about it only the night before.

'Den dere's dat cudin o' M's Perry's—de rale dark one; but he ain't got ernuff money. Dat whole fambly done run th'u dey money like a rat th'u a barn.'

Dorothy had motioned for her hat and Letha handed it to her, standing back to watch with pride as she tilted and pinned the conglomeration of lace and ribbon, birds, fruit, and flowers on her hair.

'You sho am purty,' said Letha sincerely. Suddenly her eyes widened and filled with tears. Her face crumpled and she fell on her knees beside the girl, catching her hand and weeping bitterly.

'Oh, Miss Darchy—what's goner become o' me ef you runs off? *What's goner happen ter me without you here?*'

'Why, I'd never leave you, Letha!' said Dorothy, deeply touched. 'I'd take you with me and you'd be my maid—just like now, only you wouldn't have to cook, too. Mr. Rodes can well afford to let me have a personal maid—and so can I, for that matter.'

Letha leaned back on her haunches, her face transformed as quickly as though it had been brushed by an April shower.

'You said it!' she cried. 'You done tole me who you loves de bes'!' And leaning forward, she kissed the girl's hand passionately, crying between tears and giggles, 'Thank you, Miss Darchy—an' God bless you, mah baby lamb, mah honey chile!'

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Suddenly in the mirror Dorothy saw Lutie's face reflected. It was white and drawn, and out of it Lutie's eyes stared dark and accusing. She turned back and saw the little girl in the doorway. Opening her arms impulsively, she called, 'Come here Lutie! Come to sister!'

Lutie did not move. She said stiffly, 'You're leaving.'

Dorothy got up, realizing with sudden sense of ridiculousness that she still didn't have her kid pumps on. She stooped and reached for them and slipped them on, not taking her eyes off Lutie's face.

Lutie was in her nightgown. Its long sleeves and embroidered ruffle about her neck emphasized the air of innocence and tragedy about her.

Dorothy went over and put her arm around her, leading her into the room and drawing the stiffly reluctant younger girl down on the dressing-table bench.

'You're going to school in a week or two, Lutie,' she said gently. She let her cool fingers smooth back the brown wisps of hair about Lutie's clear-cut forehead. 'You'll be back among your friends and you won't have to be with Isabel at all. But if I don't get out now—I'm stuck here with her. Don't you see that? And, look—if I get married right off, or very soon, anyway—I'll have a home of my own, and when your holidays come—you can come and stay with me as long as you want!'

'Daddy wouldn't let me,' said Lutie, in a smothered voice. 'I can hear him now—saying it wouldn't be polite to *her*.'

'Don't worry about that one minute,' said Dorothy, with such conviction that Lutie began to breathe easier. 'She doesn't like either one of us enough to want us there. She likes Ran and she'll be content to have him. She'll be tickled to death to have me take you off her hands. As for me, I'll *be polite*—and nothing more!'

Lutie turned and stared at her. Dorothy felt a wave of maternal warmth sweep over her. She put her arm around Lutie, who held her off and said, 'Dorothy—do you promise me—on your word

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of honour—that you'll do that—let me come to you? I won't be any trouble—— But I just can't stay with Isabel—not and have her for my m-mother!

Dorothy said, in a soothing tone which Letha supplemented with little sympathetic mutterings and ejaculations, 'I promise you, Lutie—word of honour. My home is your home—until you marry or make a home of your own somewhere else.'

Lutie wept silently, until Dorothy, turning to the dressing-table, took out a lacy handkerchief. She shook a few drops of cologne on it and holding it under Lutie's nose said, 'Blow!'

Lutie blew obediently and gave the older girl a watery smile and, an instant later, a breath-taking hug.

'Look,' said Dorothy. 'You get into my bed and Letha'll bring you a nice tray of breakfast—you're as thin as a pipe-stem—you ought to eat more, Lutie, you'll be having consumption. Get that new George Barr McCutcheon there on my table and be a lady of leisure today. I'm going in town for a while and I'll bring you something extra special—what shall it be?'

'Chocolate éclairs,' said Lutie promptly, sniffing the cologne with relish.

'You ain't had no brekfus yo'self,' said Letha indignantly. 'You ain't goin' traipsin' off ter town with no vittals in yo' stummick. You come on downstairs and lemme give you yo' brekfus, den I'll feed Lutie.'

'You see that she has a good breakfast, Letha,' said Dorothy, as gathering up her purse and gloves she left the room.

'I sho will, I'll bring her aigs and hot biscuit and milk and jelly and some o' dem last figs wid cream.'

'I didn't realize how thin she was until I put my arm around her while she was in her nightgown,' said Dorothy. 'Poor child—I guess I've been pretty much of a pig, Letha. But I'm going to be better from now on. I'm going to be a mother to Lutie and she's going to have a home she wants to come to from now on.'

'You ain't never been nothin' but a' angel sense you was born,'

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said Letha, with conviction. 'Now set down an' eat somethin', an' don't swaller it whole neither.'

Dorothy's first impulse had been to call Jonah that morning and announce the news of Isabel and Ran's engagement and then to tell him that she, too, was marrying and leaving The Chimneys. But the look on Letha's face when she had broken the news to her had decided her that she would be missing something if she told Jonah the news over the telephone. She wanted to see him when she said, 'Father has asked Isabel to marry him,' and she wanted the comfort that his sympathy would give her. Jonah, Dorothy felt, was the last member of her family to whom she could turn. She longed to talk to him and the thought of their mutual loneliness made her feel an especial tenderness towards him.

She swallowed the coffee and scrambled eggs which Letha, dragon-eyed, forced down her, but her hands were icy and she tasted nothing. She was filled with a cold excitement that excluded every other sensation.

'Tell Jim-boy to bring my car around,' she said to Letha, patting her mouth with her napkin. 'I'll be back right after lunch, or maybe earlier.'

She went out, tilting the hat again in the hall mirror, and stepped into the car, driving slowly down The Chimneys' driveway.

She drove as fast as she dared, her mind racing with the wheels. She wondered what young Rodes would think, when after all the times she had put him off, she suddenly capitulated—as she had meant to all along. She thought with sudden overwhelming emotion of his nice grey eyes and the funny way his hair stood up in wisps on the crown of his head, and she thought, 'Jonah'll be pleased—he's always liked him.'

The pike ended abruptly and she bent all of her energy to manœuvering in the city traffic.

Jonah stood at the window in his upstairs study and looked down at the street. It was ten o'clock in the morning and sultry.

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Though no trees had turned, there was a swelling sense of impending change—and the feeling seemed to have concentrated in Jonah's breast, making him restless and eager for a change of some sort himself.

For three weeks he had shut himself away and read and re-read the galley of his book on Jennifer. It had long since been accepted by an enthusiastic publisher, but like a mother who dreads to see her child go out into the world alone, Jonah clung to this, his first creation, putting off the moment of its exposure to the critics. There were days when he thought it was a splendid book that would be sure to find an enthusiastic audience: and there were these dark days when the whole thing seemed weak and a childish fabric woven out of the warmth of sentimentality and longing.

But the long uneven sheets with his own words in actual type gave a finality to what he had done that was at once exhilarating and frightening. When he had made the last correction and tied the galley sheets into a neat bundle for mailing, he felt let down. He wished he had someone to talk to about it, or someone with whom to celebrate the book's completion.

Ten o'clock in the morning is not a particularly propitious time to seek companions for a celebration, he realized, and so he leaned against the window and looked wistfully into the empty street. A boy on a bicycle came by. He had flaming red hair and wore overalls and a green shirt. He was singing in a cracked voice,

'Johnny saw Frankie a-comin'—
Out the back door he did scoot,
But Frankie took aim with her pistol;
An' the gun went, "Root a toot-toot!"
He was her man, but he done her wrong!'

Jonah smiling in sympathy felt the warm sun on the boy's hair, the strong pull of his arms on the handle-bars, and the stretch of the legs in their ribbed black stockings, as though he were the boy himself. He had an impulse to lean out of the

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window and say 'Hey!' to him, or to sing the next verse of Frankie and Johnny. But before he could bring himself to, the boy was far up the street and hidden by the trees. There came back jerkily,

'Bring out your long black coffin,
Bring out your funeral clo'es,
Johnny's gone and cashed his checks,
To the graveyard Johnny goes.
He was her man, but he done her wrong!'

Jonah was about to turn away from the window when a car slowed up and came to a standstill in front of the house. Through the trees he saw that it was Dorothy's car, that she was alone and getting out. Delight filled him to think that she had come just now. He hurried out of the room and down the stairs to meet her. She had just closed the picket gate when she looked up and saw him, his hair ruffled, his eyes bright with excitement. For a moment a pang of disappointment swept over her.

'He knows!' she thought. 'Somebody's already told him!'

But as he limped toward her and kissed her warmly, he cried, 'Which of my guardian angels sent you to town today—just when I was longing for company and a spree?'

'You haven't heard, then?'

Something in her face startled him. Still holding her hands in his, he said, 'No—I haven't. Not bad news, I hope?' and looked at her searchingly.

'Let's go inside,' she said, and he followed her wonderingly into the house.

In his study she began pulling off her gloves as she paced back and forth. He closed the door, standing there and looking at her apprehensively.

'It's about Father,' she said—'Father and Isabel. He's asked her to marry him.'

They looked at each other across the room—remembering. Jonah thought at once of Evan's remarks two years before, when he had left Riverridge to marry Peggy Little. Isabel had done

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just what Evan had known she would do. She had simply stayed there and Ran had fallen into her lap.

He grinned, and shook his head ruefully.

'Hadn't you seen it coming?' he asked.

She moved impatiently and flung herself into a chair.

'I suppose so. You see a lot of things coming. But you always think something will stop them—if you don't want them to come.'

Jonah went and sat on the sagging old lounge in the corner. He reached for his pipe and filled it and Dorothy pulled the pins out of her hat and set it on her knee, ruffling the dark hair up from her moist forehead.

Jonah filled the pipe slowly, staring out at the branches of the trees. His mind was racing back to the day Isabel had first married into the Tremont family, back to the days he had dreaded her love for Evan, to his grandfather's death and Isabel standing white-faced at the foot of the bed.

He remembered her the day that Evan had married—that ghastly Christmas—and he remembered Ran coming out of her room on the day that the wills were read—and he could see that there had never been any other ending for her but this.

'Tell me. What changed your feeling for Isabel so completely?' he asked. 'When she first came, and for about a year after, you thought she was angelic.'

'That's probably the reason I went to the other extreme when I finally saw through her,' said Dorothy. 'It was simply a school-girl's crush, and I got over it. Then, when she married Grandpa—the girls at school talked a lot and teased me about her and Mother—Mother never liked her much, she thought Isabel was cold and greedy. And I think she was afraid of her,' Dorothy added slowly. 'She was afraid of Isabel's vitality and her beauty—she *is* beautiful. I think Mother knew that she had never really lived up to Father's expectations of her—she was too much of a lady, in every sense for a man who was just growing up—he was like a big overgrown boy for so long—and he wanted Mother to

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wear a lot of jewelry and dash around in society to show what a success he was.'

'When are they to be married?'

'Right away,' said Dorothy. 'At least I think so. He was so smug about having asked Isabel to marry him and when I thought of what was back of it all—I believe she'd marry anybody to keep Riverridge awhile longer—I——'

'Hey! Wait a minute,' protested Jonah, 'I can't keep up with you. Are you mad because he's marrying her, or because she's marrying him, or because you think she's just marrying Ran for the place—he's a terribly attractive man, remember, and her type—I'd say—not feeling as bitterly towards her as you obviously do.'

'Of course, she's marrying him for the place—she's marrying him for the same reason that she married Grandfather—to make herself comfortable—nothing else! The place doesn't belong to him for keeps, remember—it comes to Lutie and Ran and me, and I suppose since I'm of age we could make things impossible for her. But I'm not going to. I'm not quite that much dog-in-the-manger. I don't want the house just to stand there with nobody to run it—I have to admit she does a good job of that. But I'm not going to live in it *with* her!'

Jonah had flushed darkly at the remark Dorothy made about the house being theirs. He suddenly saw himself showing the family lawyer to the door two years ago and himself promising to see that Ran made a correct will so that the children would inherit. He had never summoned the courage to tell Ran how to run his business, and he had, once he had left home, let the whole business of the ownership of Riverridge slip his mind. He felt a great guilt now, not to have mentioned it to Ran, whom he saw frequently in town and with whom he sometimes had lunch. He made a new resolve to speak of it to his uncle at once.

'I hate her!' Dorothy said viciously, and Jonah, startled, cried, 'Oh, don't, Dolly! You don't hurt her by feeling that way—you only hurt yourself. That's the worst part about people who

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are like Isabel. The harm they do us is in what we let them do to our characters or our dispositions. It's not in the material things they take from us.'

'You can be smug,' said Dorothy impatiently, her voice full of tears. 'You don't have to live with her! It's not *your* father she's marrying—*your* house she's living in, running—she's not going to be *your* stepmother!'

Jonah was sick with pity for her, and depressed to think he had been, as she said, so smug about it. He rose and went over to her, taking the big hat out of the way and sitting on the edge of the armchair with her. He put his arm around her and drew her head down to his shoulder, thinking, '*What a louse I am! I'm almost all she's got left and I go and fail her the very first time she turns to me!*'

He kissed her and let her cry on to his shoulder, and then he said: 'Poor dear! It's hellish for you, I know. But why do you live with them? You're of age—why not get Ran to make The Chimneys over to you?—he'd probably do anything to appease you now, and the Lord knows he should! You and Lutie can go on living there with Letha to look after you——'

'I'm going away,' she sobbed. 'I'm not going to live on the place a minute longer than I have to. I'm going to get married myself——' She stopped and looked at him with tear-filled eyes, and he said, 'No! Dorothy you're not doing this just to get away, are you? You're not marrying someone you don't love!'

She smiled and said tremulously: 'I'm not that stupid, Jonah. No—I've meant to marry him for a long time—only he doesn't know it yet. It's Dusty Rodes. He asks me about once a week, but I didn't want to settle down.'

She pulled a handkerchief out of the belt of her dress and blew her nose with reassuring vigour. Then, taking Jonah's hand in hers and turning the ring on it absently, she said: 'I just thought I could go on playing forever, I suppose. But now that this other thing has come up—I see that it's a good time to get out. And there's Lutie——'

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'Yes, Lutie!' cried Jonah with sudden anxiety. 'How is she taking this?'

'Badly. She never liked Isabel. You know that. And she can't bear the idea of her taking Mother's place. She's away a lot—Lutie, I mean—but even so, she has to come home sometime——'

At Jonah's raised eyebrow, she flushed and said: 'That's just it—poor Lutie, who of all people loves Riverridge the most, has been kept away from it for two years now and probably will for the rest of her life because *Isabel* doesn't like her! She's unhappy and thin and lost and pitiful—and that's why I've stopped playing and am going to get married right away. I'm going to make a home for Lutie—until she has one of her own.'

'I suppose that Dusty will be perfectly in accord with your marrying him to make a home for Lutie,' said Jonah ironically.

'He'll be in accord with anything I want to do,' she said, laughing, and he thought, '*She looks like Grandmother!*' and remembered his book, waiting to be mailed.

'He won't care,' she added. 'Lutie will be in school a lot and she'll have to visit Riverridge for decency's sake. But it will mean everything to her to have her own place to come to—to feel loved and wanted again.'

Jonah leaned forward and kissed her, and then got up. He went and sat on the window ledge, sucking at the pipe which had gone dead.

'It's not that Father doesn't love her,' said Dorothy. 'But he just doesn't know what she needs. He's too busy, and he—well, he's a dear in lots of ways, but you know, Jonah, that he doesn't, he *can't* have the feeling for Riverridge that Lutie has.'

'Will they marry before Lutie goes back to school, I wonder?'

'I don't know. But knowing Isabel, I'd say while the iron is hot. After all—there's no reason why they shouldn't. They'll probably be married in the parlour at Riverridge with all the pomp and ceremony that she can think up. I only hope she doesn't ask me to be a bridesmaid! She'll surely have little Ran for a ring-bearer—bah!' said Dorothy, but Jonah noticed with

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relief that talking about it had changed her mood—she could almost joke about it now.

'And when are you planning to inform your young man that you have relented?'

Dorothy grinned with her old mischievousness and looked out at the sky.

'Would you say the moon would be full tonight? Well, we're going to the Foulks' dance, Betty's farewell party. You know what a perfectly beautiful setting that will be for a proposal! Quite the most romantic he's had yet. I think I'll accept him tonight. It will sound so well when I describe it to my grandchildren—the lake, the garden in the moonlight, the scent of the—well, of whatever's blooming now!'

'You're all-fired sure of yourself, Miss Smarty,' said Jonah, laughing.

'I'll be irresistible—you should see my new dress. Anyway, he always does propose—so why shouldn't I be sure?'

'No reason on earth,' admitted Jonah. 'And he's a lucky dog.'

'I'm a lucky girl,' she answered, sobered. 'He is so fine, and the Rodes have said that as soon as we marry they'll move to town and give him Greenfields—and you know that's one of the finest estates around here. They want me to refurnish it any way I like—only I probably shan't. I love it the way it is. And Lutie will love it, too. The river goes right back of it, just as it does at Riverridge, and the woods are thick on the south side—I want to make it *our* home, just as soon as I can.'

'Where's Lutie today? You didn't bring her with you?'

'No, I left her at home in my bed, reading a romance. And I promised to be home right after lunch if not before. I expect I'd better go now—'

'Have lunch with me,' he said, suddenly wanting her to terribly. 'You see, I'm through my book today, proof and everything. It's on the laps of the gods now—there's nothing more that I can do for it. I feel a little lost and a little afraid of what's going to happen to it. But I want to celebrate, too. I was just

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wishing for someone to celebrate with when you came along, like a fairy godmother or something——'

'And dumped all my troubles on your head! Oh, I am glad about the book—when will it come out?'

'In another month or so—not too long, I hope. I'm terribly nervous about it. You can't tell how the critics may react. I'm mailing the proofs this morning. Suppose you take me to town and I get them off—then I can't get cold feet at the last moment and tear the whole thing up. We can have lunch together—and I'll send Lutie a book or so,' he said as he rummaged for his hat in the untidy closet. 'Why is she in bed?'

'Oh, she may not be now. But she looked so forlorn this morning when I left, I told Letha to give her breakfast in bed. I've already begun my mothering job,' she added, smiling at him as she put on her hat in front of the mantel mirror.

'Good girl. Here's my hat—now the book—let's go. Can we pick up your young man, too?'

'I'd love it, but I guess I won't. I'm afraid I'll forget and let him know I love him, and then I'd have to say, "Yes, dears, I confess that I accepted your grandfather over a plate of chop suey."'

Jonah laughed and said, 'All right—I see your point,' and they went out of the apartment. 'When I've written a book or so, I suppose I'll move to New York and be a "real" author! But I'd really like a little cottage somewhere'—he lowered his voice—'where I don't have a landlady addicted to rutabagas!'

They ran down the stairs together, their elbows bumping amicably. At the bottom he stopped and hugged her, kissing her on the lips—'That's good-bye to our past,' he said ruefully. 'Things seem to be breaking away from me, one after another. I feel like a shorn lamb.'

She kissed him in return, and for a moment her lips were tremulous and shy against his, her eyes moist with quick tears. Then they stepped into the glare of the midday.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IN the few weeks between Dorothy's visit to him and Isabel's wedding in September, Jonah saw more of the family than he had since his grandfather's death. He moved out to The Chimneys, welcoming the change from the city's heat, and gave himself over to the task of reconciling Lutie to the idea of a stepmother. Together they roamed the woods and the river road back of the house and lay on the grass beyond Jennifer's garden. Lutie silently vowed to visit for the last time every sacred spot and to fix in her memory forever such things as how the dew stood on each serrated point of the strawberry leaves in the early morning, or how, a little later, it made a lavender mist in the purple-seeded grasses.

They were wonderful weeks of misty golden mornings, banks of white clouds, thundery afternoons, and sometimes nights ablaze with stars. They walked in the woods and in Jennifer's garden, they swam in the river and lay looking into the clear waters of the creek. They turned over old stones, and when the inhabitants had scattered madly like creatures in an invaded city, they turned them carefully back again.

Lutie had said nothing to Jonah of the significances of these farewell pilgrimages. They had talked of her school, of things they liked and disliked and of books, and Jonah had read to her by the hour. But through it all she had maintained an aloofness

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which had bothered Jonah extremely. She had not wailed nor wept nor threatened. She had merely been still when Isabel's name was mentioned and looked at Jonah and Dorothy as though they had conspired against her. He had promised Dorothy that if the opportunity arose he would try to break down Lutie's reserve and, after getting behind that shell of withdrawn misery, try to make her feel less tragic about the whole thing.

After they had walked through the rosy buckberries to climb the ridge, late one afternoon, he got his chance.

Lutie was lying face down, looking at the water below them, and Jonah saw that she was crying silently. He let her alone for a while, knowing the bitterness of her farewell to childhood, and then he said:

'Look, Lutie: you can't let things get you down this way. I know how you feel. You feel that all this will never be the same again. It won't—not because of Isabel—but because you're growing up and because things never are the same for long. At least they don't seem the same. Of course, it's really you that change, not the things—not the fields and the hills and the river, or not places or sensations or beauty. But your feeling for it changes.'

He stopped, but she lay rigid, her face buried in the crook of her arm. One long silky braid lay softly on the grass beside him. He picked it up, curling the end over and over his finger as he talked.

'You think you haven't changed, but you have. Lots of the things that puzzled—and enchanted—you a few years ago are just commonplace now. If Isabel had never come here, you'd still have a feeling of things ending—as I have several times. It's only that way that life can go on—by making new beginnings. You mustn't blame Isabel for that. If you blame her for all the strange and lonely feelings you have, you'll soon get into the habit of blaming someone or something else for all the less pleasant things which happen to you. And that would not only be ridiculous but weak.

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'Look. Grandma died and your mother died and Grandy's gone. Is Isabel to blame for that? Isn't it just something that comes to all people sometime? And since these things have happened, wouldn't that make you feel lost and forlorn and no longer a happy child—without Isabel's influence?'

He could imagine her flushed and unhappy face, damp with tears and swollen with pent-up misery, hidden by the thin bent arm. He longed to take her in his own arms and comfort her, but he felt that she needed to get control of herself and that cuddling her would not help at that point.

'Isabel is going to marry your father. It's perfectly natural. He's lonely, too. And even if he never married, you wouldn't spend much of your time assuaging his loneliness. You have your own life to live and it will probably be full and happy. It wouldn't be natural for you to feel that you had to stay out of things and be company for him. You aren't so selfish as to want him to be lonely, to have no real home, just because you and Isabel can't get along.'

She ignored the note of inquiry in his voice, but she moved uncomfortably and sniffed.

'You can do two things,' he said after a pause. 'You can go on generating hate and misery inside of yourself until it eats you up and you grow up to be a sour old maid. Or you can overlook her altogether—that is, as far as she upsets you.'

He remembered Dorothy saying, '*You can afford to be smug!*' but he went on determinedly.

'When you let her get you down this way, you let her win, if you see what I mean. She's showing that she's stronger than you are. But when you get to the point that what she does doesn't faze you, when you've made so full a life of your own and developed so much character that you are self-sufficient—then you've won. That's all there is to it.'

There was a long silence then.

'How do you mean,' she asked in a muffled voice—'made my life full?'

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'Well, for one thing you fill it full of so many interesting things that Isabel can't get in and make trouble because it's so crowded with good books and hobbies and friends of your own age and things that really interest you that—well—she's too tiny a part of it. Then you—well, you can really *make* something of yourself. Resolve to be something, to do something constructive and stick to it. Plan to get a job when you get out of school and train yourself for that job. Have an absorbing interest—see?' he ended, feeling that he was beginning to sound a little like a pamphlet on 'How to Become a Success.'

She lifted her head, pushing her hair back from her warm forehead with her hand, and stared across the river. He watched her lower lip tremble. Then she caught it in her teeth and batted back the tears that flooded her eyes. He kept still, thumping the braid against the back of her red sweater, waiting and watching the sky change as subtly and as slowly as the control of her small, mobile face. He thought of his grandfather and of how he had loved this child. It seemed impossible that never again he would hear their so-different voices mingling as they went about the garden or the house.

She rolled over and took a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her eyes.

'She's not stronger than I am,' she said damply.

'Of course she's not. All you've got to do is to stop letting her fill up your whole horizon. Fill your mind with other things and there you are.'

'I know. Like a talisman—something you have whether people know it or not. Something you can think of and be with when people bore you or want to hurt you. Like a secret or a magic place to go into.'

He hadn't meant that at all, but her interpretation interested him and pleased him almost more than if she had grasped exactly what he had meant. He said: 'Something like that—only more. A talisman is just something that helps you against something else. If you depend on it too much, you don't develop at all and you

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don't grow. You're in danger of staying too much within yourself—and that's bad. If you are to live and get anything out of living, you've got to do something active about it. You can't just stand and shut your eyes and say, "Now I remember River-ridge in the moonlight, so nothing Isabel says or does can touch me." "

Lutie looked up at him and smiled for the first time.

'You've got to do things—lots of things and one thing particularly and more than others—that's that absorbing interest. But it should never absorb you to the extent of your shutting out all life, all other people—just the one thing that has the power to hurt you. And when you've done that, you'll find that the thing that had the power to hurt you has lost it.'

She said nothing, but the fingers of her hand curled around his and she leaned against him and gave a long quivering sigh of relaxation.

Two weeks before his marriage, Ran went to see Milly. When Isabel had announced her intention of marrying him, Milly had at first pretended to be shocked ('He's practically kin to you!' she had cried), then she had wept secretly, and, finally, taking her dignity in hand, had packed up and paid a suddenly urgent visit to a niece in town.

Isabel had been glad to get her out of the house, not only because Milly's personality often jarred upon her, but because she knew that if Milly remained she would be full of suggestions and advice as to the conventions and arrangements of such a marriage. Isabel had her own very decided ideas on the subject and a good many details about the farm which she wished to attend to without Milly's fluttering supervision.

On the other hand, both Ran and Isabel recognized the potency of Milly's loyalty or enmity and what a force she could be in stemming the gossip which was bound to arise concerning their marriage. It was important that Milly not only be placated, but made to feel that she had a very definite place which none but she

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could fill, so that if gossip grew rife, she could and would nip it in the bud and by inference and definite statement lend the colour of respectability to Isabel's every move.

So Ran took an afternoon off and on the excuse of exhibiting a new car drove Milly out to the country and back to town for tea. By exerting his easy charm, he succeeded in making Milly feel something like a cross between a paramour and a mother-in-law with all the privileges and none of the disadvantages of both. By the time he left her cozily full of tea and muffins, he had convinced her that his very destiny hung on her approving interest. He had persuaded her to come and stay at Riverridge with little Ran while he and Isabel were away and had given her a ridiculously substantial cheque to cover any 'incidental expenses' which might arise while she was there.

At The Chimneys Jonah was feeling the beginning of the tidal wave of publicity which was to accompany the publication of his book. From New York his publishers wired that the advance criticisms had been even more enthusiastic than they had expected, that the book was being rushed for early publication, and that they wanted him to be in New York for a bookstore autographing party and further celebrations. In spite of all his attempts to keep calm, Jonah began to feel prickles of excitement and a definite thrill at being an author. Dorothy and Lutie were tremendously excited, and even Ran and Isabel took time out from their personal bliss to congratulate and praise him. Jonah went about in an aura of tenderness and gratitude and felt as if he were walking on air.

One sunny morning in late September, Isabel and Ran were married in the little brick church where Tremont had so long been a communicant and vestry member. Jonah gave the bride away. There were no attendants, but only Lutie and Dorothy, Dusty, the servants, and a dewy-eyed Milly stood in the cool shadows of the little church which smelled of dust and sanctity and heard the solemn words.

Lutie, pale beneath a wide Leghorn hat, clutched Jonah's arm

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desperately. She was leaving that afternoon for school and at Christmas when she came home she was to be Dorothy's maid of honour. Jonah could not make out whether it was grief at her father's marriage or excitement at the prospect of Dorothy's which gave her the slightly green tinge she wore; but he cast his eyes about speculatively for the nearest exit in case excitement, as it often did with Tremonts, became too much for her insides.

That night a great harvest moon rose up over the ridge beyond the river. On the long back porch of The Chimneys young Rodes and Dorothy sat with Jonah and watched it climb into the sky, turning the fields to silver, the river to a shining ribbon.

Their talk, happily desultory and soft against the autumn sound of insects and night breezes, turned to Isabel. Dorothy was supplying a background about her for Dusty, who had only known her slightly.

'She came here with nothing—absolutely nothing—Grandma used to give her spending money. And now look, she has everything—at least, the most important things.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that,' said Jonah easily. 'The things Isabel wanted most, I think, are the things she couldn't take and we couldn't give.'

'What things? She has Riverridge—she'll own it before she's through, by hook or crook.'

'Well, I think she wanted most a feeling of belonging, a feeling of being a person with a background, with ancestors. That's why she is so passionately attached to Riverridge. I think she has found out that houses and furniture and land don't necessarily give you that and that all she'll ever have is the semblance of it. There is a certain integrity, a certain—well, *complacency*, that people like us have that she can never have.'

'What snobs we are!' cried Dorothy, laughing.

Jonah only grinned, and Dorothy said: 'It wasn't so much Isabel's having things—even our things—that bothered me.'

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It was that she always, even when I was so crazy about her, baffled me. She had a way of getting around people, of getting things to come her way without the slightest apparent effort.'

Jonah, remembering, saw Ran standing in the dim garden that night before Tremont's marriage and heard Isabel explaining that she simply knew how to take advantage of an opportunity when it came along.

He told Dusty and Dorothy of the scene, making light of it, leaving out how Ran had kissed her and the lustiness of his obvious admiration for her, even then, before Lucile's death.

'She'd make a good business partner,' laughed young Rodes, and Jonah answered, 'That's what Ran said. Well, he's got her now.'

'And she's got him,' said Rodes.

'I used to think that if I ever made a lot of money writing—some people do, you know,' Jonah explained to Rodes' amusement—'I'd buy Riverridge from Isabel or the family and restore the old way of living.'

'You couldn't,' said Dorothy and Dusty together, and Dorothy added: 'I mean buy it. Don't you see that as long as Isabel had anything to say about it, you couldn't? It stands for all those things she wants—it's the "outward and visible sign" of the——'

'"Inward and spiritual" things; I know. I know now. And I know now that you could never go back and restore a way of living.'

'That's what I meant,' said Rodes. 'You might go back and buy the house and have the money to live as lavishly as your grandparents lived, and as graciously. But unless you were crazy and lived in a dream, you'd know it wasn't the old way of living any more than today is yesterday or tomorrow.'

'No—nobody else would be living it with you; whether we like it or not, we keep moving, I reckon.'

'That's the trouble with so many of us around here,' said Rodes. He sat with his back against a post with his arm across Dorothy's knees. 'We hate that moving on. We'd rather live

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in the past—even when it's ashes and debt and just a shell of pretence—than to take our heads out of the hole and look ahead and do something. There are too darned many Southerners living on the shreds of glory or a dream of something beautiful and fine that's gone if they'd just recognize it; and poverty and debt, land erosion, land starvation, and industrial growth are just so many gnats buzzing about our tail feathers while we keep our silly heads underground.'

Dorothy chuckled suddenly, and Jonah with amusement edging his voice said: 'I'm glad to hear you talk like that, Dusty. I'm a good example of somebody with the same attitude. Can't bear to pull myself away from the apron strings of that old Southern culture—that illusion of Mammys and mint juleps. That's the reason I left Riverridge, really. Only I didn't go far enough. If it hadn't been for Isabel, I might never have left. I owe her that, certainly.'

'He's going to get a little cottage somewhere,' said Dorothy, still laughing. 'But I thought it was rutabagas you were avoiding, not mint juleps.'

'Nobody would seriously avoid a mint julep,' said Rodes. 'In fact, I think it's time somebody toasted the bride and groom, Jonah's book and our own future, don't you, Sugar? What's my future father-in-law got on the hip or in the cellar?'

'Plenty of what it takes,' said Dorothy, getting up. 'Shall we mix us a "julep" and drink to the New South?'

In the kitchen they moved about and talked amicably and Jonah thought how easily the whole affair of Isabel's entrenchment into the family had worked out. When the drinks were ready, Dusty, with his arm around Dorothy, raised his glass.

'To the bride and groom!' he cried, and they drank. 'To Jonah's career! To our future, darling, and to all the ostriches—may they come up to breathe!'

They sat about on the tables and chairs, and Dusty, breaking ice for another drink, said: 'We have to drink to Jonah's future marriage, darling. We don't want to hog all the happiness.'

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'Is he going to have one?' asked Dorothy, pleasantly groggy.

'Sure—some day. I "seen him with a lady" last time I was in New York.'

'No, really! Why, Jo, you've been holding out on me! Who was she? Was she beautiful, Dusty?'

Jonah, to his embarrassment, blushed a deep red, and both Dusty and Dorothy shouted with laughter.

'Where did you ever see me with a woman?' he asked, and Dusty said, 'It was on the night of—November the—lemme see—fifteenth of last year, m'lad. At the Waldorf, as I live and breathe. She was a blonde,' he added, turning to Dorothy, and Jonah said, 'Oh, that was no lady, that was an authoress!'

'So that's why you went to New York three times last year!' cried Dorothy. 'You baseless deceiver! He told us it was to see Evan after he got his sight back, and his publishers.'

She looked at him with mock reproach and he fished a cherry out of his glass and popped it into her mouth.

'I suppose she has a little cottage in the country,' mumbled Dorothy with her mouth full, and, when he blushed again, went into shrieks of laughter.

'Can't cut his apron-strings, huh?' said Dusty. 'Haven't gone far enough away from Riverridge yet, eh? I suppose she has a house in Vermont, or Connecticut, a little place in Natick—a Yankee, damme, that's what she is, a damn' Yankee!'

'In Connecticut,' said Jonah. 'She has a place, but I've never seen her but twice—for all I know she may be married now and have a dozen children.'

'Come, come, not a dozen, not since I saw you last year. It would have been in the papers!'

They were being nonsensically happy together after the strain of the last few weeks, the strain of getting the book well launched, of getting Isabel's wedding over and Lutie's point of view adjusted. They were happy and young and warmed with good whiskey, and Jonah felt that he had never been so contented in his life. He felt free and satisfied to leave Dorothy in the hands of this

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gangling, likeable, cool-eyed youngster who so obviously not only adored her, but meant to assure her future for her.

His voice was husky with laughter as he shook the ice in his glass, looking down into it and saying defensively: 'You know I don't have any use for women. They're either just butterflies like Dotty, or they're really clever, but they drink too much and get loud and obnoxious at parties, or they're misunderstood and want to weep on you, or they're freakish or——'

'Well, you could knock me over with a feather!' cried Dorothy. 'I never knew our little Jonah, our violet, our timid Jo, had had all these experiences.'

'You never can tell,' mocked Dusty. 'These quiet ones——'

'Idiots,' said Jonah affectionately. 'I'm going upstairs. I'm leaving early in the morning, so I'll tell you good night and good-bye now. Of course I'll be back for the wedding—I'll be back in a few weeks at the most.'

'With the authoress who ain't no lady?' asked Dorothy. 'What's her name? Come on, tell us.'

'Her name is—why, what difference does it make? I tell you I've only seen her twice. You get that nonsense out of your head!' he added so exasperatedly that Dorothy whooped again.

'Good-bye, fool!' he said, taking her in his arms and kissing her. 'Just because you two are in love——'

She stopped laughing and kissed him back warmly. It was the impulsive kiss of their childhood, but it left him shaken with tenderness. He slapped young Rodes on the back and left them, grinning and ludicrously happy in the bright glare of the kitchen lights.

On the stairs he moved slowly, thinking of the girl they had teased him about, thinking of her views and her dreams, some of which she had told him with the spontaneousness which comes with a discovered congeniality. He had known then that he needed this healthier point of view, this new way of looking back, not with nostalgia, but only for wisdom. He had written to her a few times and she had answered with obvious

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cordiality. But his old longings, his old faiths, had kept him half-hearted.

'I was "desolate and sick of an old passion,"' he thought, grinning, and suddenly longed for her, realizing that for once he yearned for something ahead of him.

But was she ahead? Was she still there, unclaimed, unattached? In sudden panic he hurried up the last steps of the stair.

In Ran's room, which he would occupy, there was a telephone on the bedside table. Jonah crossed the room and picked up the receiver, feeling a tremendous lurch inside of him as if his heart had turned over.

From where he stood in the dark room, he could see the woods between The Chimneys and Riverridge, and far across the moonlit fields and lanes, his grandfather's house, stilly white in the moonlight. It was eerily beautiful standing there, aloof and austere, yet holding all his tenderest memories. The moonlight flooded everything as far as he could see—the silvery river, the pale trees, the white house. It was a world in a lovely dream—a dream he could live in no longer.

He tried to still the lurching in him as the operator clucked briskly in his ear, but the knowledge that his voice would soon pass over all this moonlit beauty to the girl in her cottage in Connecticut made a singing tenseness in him. His voice was tight as he spoke the words which in his old life he had so seldom used: 'Long distance, please!'

THE END

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